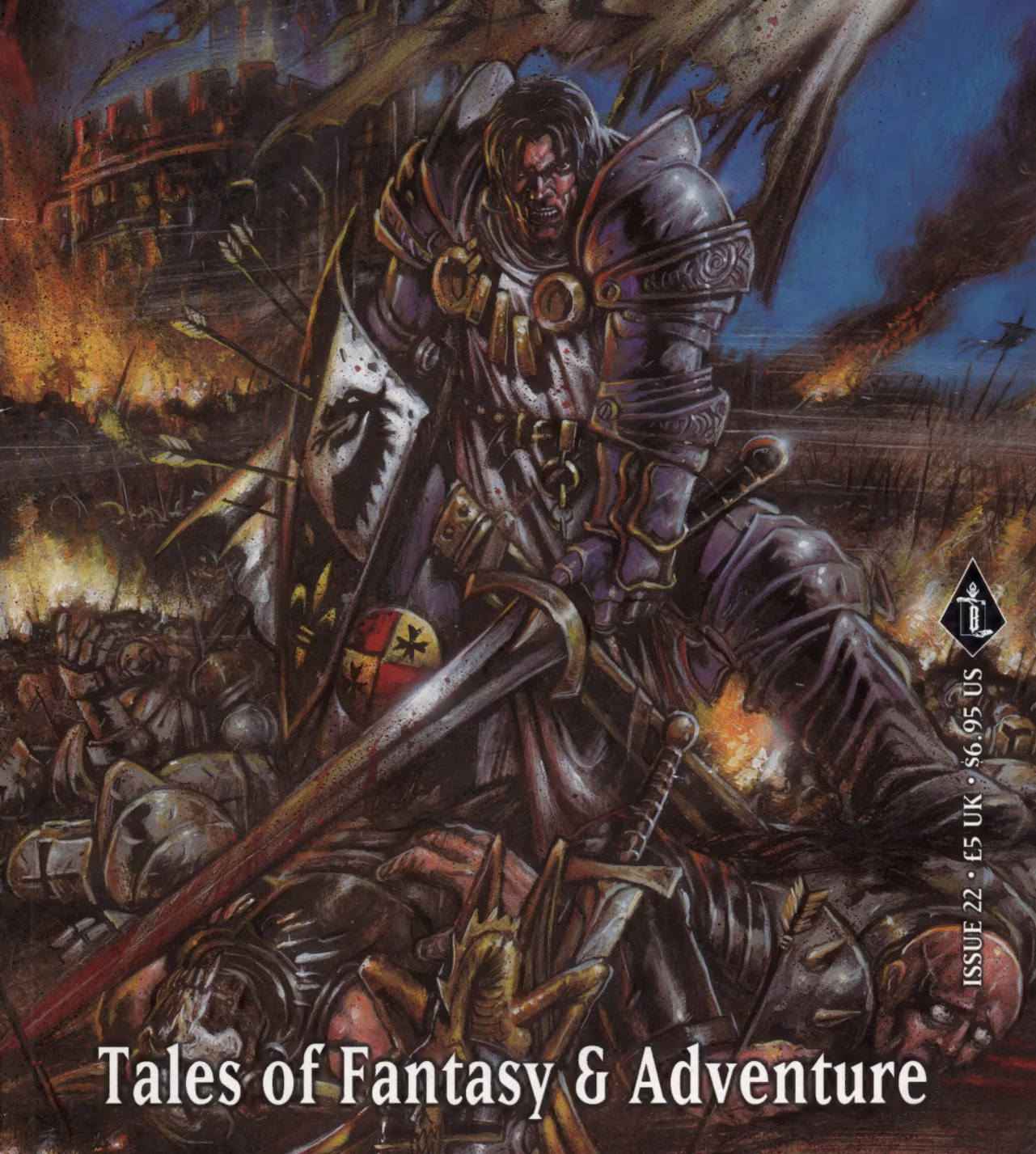


INFERNO!



ISSUE 22 • £5 UK • \$6.95 US

Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

HERE AT the Black Library, we've been releasing our new range of novels for more than a year now. It was only a few weeks ago – in preparation for a jaunt to the Frankfurt Book fair to show off our wares – that we did some sums and realised that we had sold more than three hundred thousand novels in our first year! By the standards of a Stephen King, perhaps, that's small change, but for our small team of Black Library acolytes it's a major success, and you may rest assured that we celebrated in the appropriate manner.

So, the first thing to say is, simply, *thank you*. Thank you for your support, your buying of the books of course, but also for all your emails and letters telling us which ones you liked, which you weren't so keen on (comfortingly few of those!) and so on. Do keep letting us know what you think – and especially what you'd like more of.

We already know that you are very keen on Gaunt's Ghosts, Gotrek & Felix, and Ragnar of the Space Wolves. Rest assured that new volumes

featuring all of these heroes are uppermost in our plans, starting with February's *Beastslayer* and the return of Gaunt next summer in *Honour Guard*. There will also be a range of titles featuring brand new characters, from the Last Chancers to an amazing new series concerning an Inquisitor.

Meanwhile, every time the subject of what the Black Library is going to be publishing next comes up, both here in our sinister Eldar webway home and when we dare venture out to consult with our devoted fans (ahem), one topic keeps coming up again and again: *When the [insert oath here] are you Black Library lot going to re-issue the original Games Workshop novels you did years ago?!!*

Now we have an answer. As of next August, we are planning to release not one but two novels every month. And ideally, we'd like that to be one new title – for how could we deprive you of brand new adventures featuring all your favourites? – but alongside that, a reprint of one of the classic old titles. Some of these books have been out print for close to ten years now, and we

know that there are many fans of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 who would dearly love to get their hands on them. For you folks the answer is at hand: we have heard your pleas and are working on it.

BUT BEFORE we reissue anything, we need information! Our old range included more than *two dozen* fantasy and SF novels in a variety of styles. We can't reprint them all at once – and indeed it might be that some are now out of date and inappropriate, so will never reappear. So today my question is simple: if you've read any of our old novels, tell us which ones you like or disliked. Write in or email – the addresses are just down there at the bottom of the page – and I'll send out something really cool to the best letters we get. Go on, it's not often you get to influence the plans of the elusive and mysterious Black Library. Now's your chance!

Marc Gascoigne
Editor

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CONTENTS

A BLACK LIBRARY™

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John Gravato

4 Suffer not the Unclean to Live

When the mutants of Karis Cephalon revolt in protest at the uncaring governor's policy of denying them vital medical aid, Imperial Preacher Yakov puts his reputation – and life – on the line to protect them.

Story Gav Thorpe • Illustration Adrian Smith

21 Deff Skwadron

Da Sekret Weapon. The incompetent greenskins of Deff Skwadron are entrusted with testing a top secret new payload for their fighta-bombas. Now that can't be a good thing, can it?

Script Gordon Rennie • Art Paul Jeacock

31 A Choice of Hatreds

Driven by vengeance, Reinhardt von Lichtberg has tracked his true love's killer to the small town of Kleinsdorf only to discover that somebody else wants the murderer dead – for entirely different reasons.

Story C.L. Werner

44 Pestilence

With an Uhlren's Pox pandemic sweeping across Genovingia, Higher Administrator Lemual Sark is despatched to the backwater planet of Symbal Iota to seek answers from the past.

Story Dan Abnett • Illustration Paul Dainton

56 Unforgiven

A Dark Angels chaplain leads his squadron on a dangerous mission into an enemy held city – but what is he keeping from them?

Story Graham McNeill • Illustration Graham Stoddart

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SUFFER NOT THE UNCLEAN TO LIVE

BY GAV THORPE

YAKOV CAUGHT himself dozing as his chin bowed to his chest, lulled by the soporific effect of the warm sun and the steady clatter of hooves on the cobbled street. Blinking himself awake, he gazed from the open carriage at the buildings going past him. Colonnaded fronts and tiers of balconies stretched above him several storeys, separated by wide tree-lined streets. Thick-veined marble fascias swept past, followed by dark granite facades whose polished surfaces reflected the mid-afternoon light back at him.

Another mile and the first signs of decay began to show. Crumbling mosaics scattered their stones across the narrowing pavements, creeping plants twined around balustrades and cornices. Empty windows, some no longer glazed, gaped back at him. With a yell to the horses, the carriage driver brought them to a stop and sat there waiting for the preacher to climb down to the worn cobbles.

'This is as far as I'm allowed,' the driver said without turning around, sounding half-apologetic and half-thankful.

Yakov walked around to the driver's seat and fished into the pocket of his robe for coin, but the coachman avoided his gaze and set off once more, turning the carriage down a side street and out of sight. Yakov knew better; no honest man on Karis Cephalon would take payment from a member of the clergy, but he still hadn't broken the habit of paying for services and goods. He had tried to insist once on tipping a travel-rail porter, and the man had nearly broken down into tears, his eyes fearful. Yakov had been here four years now, and yet still he was adjusting to the customs and beliefs that held sway here.

Hoisting his embroidered canvas pack further onto his shoulder, Yakov continued his journey on foot. His long legs carried him briskly past the ruins of counting houses and ancient stores, apartments that once belonged to the fabulously wealthy and the old Royal treasury, abandoned now for over seven centuries. He had already walked for half a mile when he topped the

gradual rise and looked down upon his parish.

Squat, ugly shacks nestled in the roads and alleys between the once-mighty edifices of the Royal Quarter. He could smell the effluence of the near homeless, the stench of unwashed bodies and strangely exotic melange of cooking swept to him on the smoke of thousands of fires. The sun was beginning to set as he made his way down the long hill, and soon the main boulevard was dropped into cool shadow, chilling after the earlier warmth.

Huts made from corrugated metal, rough planks, sheets of plasthene and other detritus butted up against the cut stones of the old city blocks. The babble of voices could now be heard, the screeching of children and the yapping and barking of dogs adding to the muted racket. The clatter of pans as meals were readied vied with the cries of babes and the clucking of hens. Few of the inhabitants were in sight. Most of them were indoors getting ready to eat, the rest still working out in the fields, or down the mines in the far hills.

A small girl, perhaps twelve Terran years, came running out from behind a flapping sheet of coarsely woven hemp. Her laughter was high-pitched, almost a squeal, as a boy, slightly younger perhaps, chased her down and bundled her to the ground. They both seemed to notice Yakov at the same time, and instantly quelled their high spirits. Dusting themselves down they stood up and waited respectfully, heads slightly bowed.

'Katinia, isn't it?' Yakov asked as he stopped in front of the girl.

'Yes, preacher,' she replied meekly, looking up at him with her one good eye. The other was nothing more than a scabbed, red mass which seemed to spill from the socket and across her face, enveloping her left ear and leaving one half of her scalp bald. She smiled prettily at him, and he smiled back.

‘Shouldn’t you be helping your mother with the cooking?’ he suggested, glancing back towards the ramshackle hovel that served as their home.

‘Mam’s at church,’ the girl’s younger brother, Pietor, butted in, earning himself a kick on the shin from his sibling. ‘She said we was to wait here for her.’

He looked at the boy, his shrivelled right arm and leg gave his otherwise perfectly human body a lopsided look. It was the children that always affected him the most, ever cheerful despite the bleakness of their future, the ghastriness of their surroundings. If all the Emperor’s faithful had the same indomitable spirit, He and mankind would have overcome all evil and adversity millennia ago. Their crippled, mutated bodies may be vile, he thought to himself, but their souls were as human as any.

‘Too early for church, isn’t it?’ he asked them both, wondering why anyone would be there at least two hours before mass was due to begin.

‘She says she wants to speak to you, with some other people, Preacher Yakov,’ Katinia told him, clasping her hands behind her back as she looked up at the tall clergyman.

‘Well, get back inside and make sure everything’s tidy for when your mam returns, you two,’ he told them gently, hoping the sudden worry he felt hadn’t shown.

As he hurried on his way, he tried to think what might be happening. He had heard disturbing rumours that in a few of the other shanties a debilitating plague had begun to spread amongst the mutant population. In those unhygienic close confines such diseases spread rapidly and, as slaves from all over the world congregated in the work teams, could leap from ghetto to ghetto with devastating rapidity.

Taking a right turn, Yakov made his way towards the chapel that was also his home. Raised five years ago by the mutants themselves, it was as ramshackle as the rest of the ghetto. It leaked and was freezing in the winter, baking hot in the summer. Yet the effort put into its construction was admirable, even if the result was deplorable, if not a little insulting. Yakov suspected that Karis Cephalon’s cardinal, Prelate

Kodaczka, had felt a perverse sense of satisfaction when he had heard who would be sent to tend the mutant parish. Coming from the Armormants, Yakov strongly believed that the edifices raised to the Emperor should be highly ornamented, splendid and glittering works of art in praise of the Holy Father of Mankind. To be given charge of something he would previously had declared unfit for a privy was most demeaning and even after this time the thought still rankled. Of course, Kodaczka, like all the native clergy of Karis Cephalon and the surrounding systems, was of the Lucid tendency, preferring poverty and abstinence to ostentation and excessive decoration. It had been a sore point between the two of them during more than one theological discussion, and Yakov’s obstinate refusal to accept the prevailing beliefs of his new world did his future prospects within the Ecclesiarchy no favours. Then again, he mused ruefully to himself, his chances of any kind of elevation within the hierarchy had all but died when he had been assigned the shanty as a parish.

As he walked, he saw the rough steeples of the chapel rising over the squat mutie dwellings. Its battered, twisted roofs were slicked with greying mould, despite the aggressive efforts of the voluntary work teams who maintained the shrine. As he picked his way through a labyrinth of drying lines and filth-strewn gutters, Yakov saw a large crowd gathered outside the chapel, as he expected he would. Nearly five hundred of his parishioners, each mutated to a greater or lesser degree, were stood waiting, an angry buzz emanating from the throng. As he approached, they noticed him and started flocking in his direction, and he held up his hands to halt them before they swept around him. Pious they might be, but kind on the nose they were not. They all started babbling at once, in high-pitched squeaks down to guttural bass tones, and once more he raised his hands, silencing them.

‘You speak, Gloran,’ he said, pointing towards the large mining overseer whose muscled bulk was covered in a constantly flaking red skin and open sores.

‘The plagues, preacher, has come here,’ Gloran told him, his voice as cracked as his flesh. ‘Mather Horok died of it this morning, and a dozen others are falling ill already.’

Yakov groaned inwardly but kept his craggy, hawk-like face free of expression. So his suspicions were correct: the deadly scourge had arrived in the parish.

‘And you are all here because...?’ he asked, casting his dark gaze over the misshapen crowd.

‘Come here to ask Emperor, in prayers,’ replied Gloran, his large eyes looking expectantly at Yakov.

‘I will compose a suitable mass for this evening. Return to your homes and eat: starving will not aid you against this plague,’ he said firmly. Some of the assembly moved away but most remained. ‘Go!’ snapped Yakov waving them away with a thin hand, irritated at their reticence. ‘I cannot recall suitable prayers with you taking up all my attention, can I?’

After a few more murmurs the crowd began to dissipate and Yakov turned and strode up the rough plank stairs to the chapel entrance, taking the shallow steps two at a time. He pulled aside the sagging roughspun curtain that served as a barrier to the outside world and stepped inside. The interior of the chapel was as dismal as the outside, with only a few narrow gaps in the planking and crudely bent sheets of metal of the walls to let in light. Motes of dust drifted from the rough-cut ceiling, dancing lightly in the narrow shafts of the ruddy sunlight. Without thought he turned and took a candle from the stand next to the entrance. Picking up a match from next to the pile of tallow lights, one of the few indulgences extracted from the miserly Kodaczka, he struck it on the emery stone and lit the candle. Rather than truly illuminating the chapel the flickering light created a circle of puny light around the preacher, emphasising the gloom beyond its wavering light.

As he walked towards the altar at the far end – an upturned crate covered with an altar spread and a few accoutrements he had brought with him – the candle flame flickered in the draughts wheezing through the ill-built walls, making the his shadow dance behind him. Carefully placing the candle in its holder to the left of the altar he knelt, his bony knees protesting at the solidity of the cracked roadway that made up the shrine’s floor. Cursing Kodaczka once more – he had taken away Yakov’s

prayer cushion, saying it was a sign of decadence and weakness – Yakov tried to clear his turbulent thoughts, attempting to find that place of calm that allowed him to bring forth his litanies to the Emperor. He was about to close his eyes when he noticed something on the floor in front of the altar. Looking closer, the preacher saw that it was a dead rat. Yakov sighed; it was not the first time. Despite his oratories against it, some of his parishioners still insisted on their old, barbaric ways, making such offerings to the Emperor in supplication or penance. Pushing these thoughts aside, Yakov closed his eyes, trying to settle himself.



AS HE STOOD by the entrance to the shrine, nodding reassuringly to his congregation as they filed out, Yakov felt a hand on his arm and he turned to see a girl. She was young, no older than sixteen standard years by her looks, and her pale face was pretty, framed by dark hair. Taking her hand off his robe, she smiled and it was then that Yakov looked into her eyes. Even in the gloom of the chapel they looked dark and after a moment he realised they were actually jet black, not trace of iris or white could be seen. She blinked rapidly, meeting his gaze.

‘Yes, my child?’ Yakov asked softly, bowing slightly so that he could hear her without her needing to raise her voice.

‘Thank you for your prayers, Yakov,’ she replied and her smile faded. ‘But it will take more than prayers to heal your faithful.’

‘As the Emperor sees fit,’ the preacher murmured in reply, keeping his gaze steady.

‘You must ask for medical supplies, from the Governor,’ she said calmly, not asking him, but stating it as a fact.

‘And who are you to tell me what I must and must not do, young lady?’ Yakov responded smoothly, keeping the irritation from his voice.

‘I am Lathesia,’ was her short reply, causing Yakov’s heart to flutter slightly. The girl was a wanted terrorist. The Governor’s Special Security Agents had been hunting her for months following attacks on slave pens and the homes of the wealthy

landowners. She had already been sentenced to death in absentia a trial several weeks ago. And here she was talking to him!

'Are you threatening me?' he asked, trying to keep his voice level even though a knot of fear had begun to tighten in his stomach. Her blinking rapidly increased for a moment before she gave a short, childish laugh.

'Oh no!' she squealed, stifling another giggle by covering her mouth with a delicate hand, which Yakov noticed had rough skin peeling on each slender knuckle. Taking control of herself, her face became serious. 'You know what you must do for your parish. Your congregation has already started dying, and only treatment can help them. Go to the Prelate, go to the Governor, ask them for the medicine.'

'I can already tell you what their answer will be,' Yakov said heavily, gesturing for her to follow him as he pulled the heavy curtain shut and started up the aisle.

'And what is that?' Lathesia asked, falling into step beside him, walking with quick strides to keep up with his long-legged gait.

'Medicine is in short supply, slaves are not,' he replied matter-of-factly, stopping and facing her. There was no point trying to make it easier. Every one of Karis Cephalon's ruling class could afford to lose a thousand slaves, but medical supplies, bought at great expense from offworld, could cost them half a year's profits. Lathesia understood this, but had obviously railed against the fate the Emperor had laid down for her.

'You do realise you have put me in a very awkward position, don't you, child?' he added bitterly.

'Why so?' she answered back. 'Because a preacher should not be conversing with a wanted criminal?'

'No, that is easy to deal with,' Yakov replied after a moment's thought. 'Tomorrow when I see the Prelate I will inform him that I saw you and he will tell the Governor, who will in turn send the SSA to interrogate me. And I will tell them nearly everything.'

'Nearly everything?' she said with a raised eyebrow.

'Nearly,' he replied with a slight smile. 'After all, if I say that it was you who entreated me to ask for medical supplies, there is even less chance that I will be given them.'

'So you will do this for me?' Lathesia said with a bright smile.

'No,' Yakov replied, making her smile disappear as quickly as it came. He stooped to pick up a strip of rag littering the flagstones of the floor. 'But I will do it for my parishioners, as you say. I have no hope that the request will be granted, none at all. And my poor standing with the Prelate will be worsened even more by the confrontation, but that is not to be helped. I must do as my duty dictates.'

'I understand, and you have my thanks,' Lathesia said softly before walking away, disappearing through the curtained doorway without a backward glance. Sighing, Yakov crumpled up the rag in his hand and moved to the altar to finish clearing up.



THE PLEXIGLASS window of the mono-conveyor was scratched and scuffed, but beyond it Yakov could see the capital, Karis, stretched out beneath him. Under the spring sun the whitewashed buildings were stark against the fertile plains surrounding the city. Palaces, counting houses, SSA courthouses and governmental office towers reared from the streets towards him as the conveyor rumbled noisily over its single rail. He could see other conveyor carriages on different tracks, gliding like smoke-belching beetles over the city, their plexiglass-sided cabs reflecting the sun in brief dazzles as it moved in and out from the clouds overhead.

Turning his gaze ahead, he looked at the Amethyst Palace, seat of the Governor and Cathedral of Karis Cephalon. Its high walls surrounded the hilltop on which it was built, studded with towers from which fluttered massive pennants showing the symbol of the Revolutionary Council. Once each tower would have hung the standard of one of the old aristocratic families, but they had been burnt, along with those

families, in the bloody coup that had overturned their rule seven hundred and thirty years ago. The keep, punctured at its centre by the sinister-looking mile-high black Needle of Sennamis, rose above the walls, a conglomeration of millennia of additional wings, buttresses and towers obscuring its original architecture like successive layers of patina.

Under his feet, the conveyor's gears began to grind and whirr more loudly as the carriage pulled into the Palace docking station. Yakov navigated his way through the terminus without thought, his mind directed towards the coming meeting with Prelate Kodaczka. He barely acknowledged the salutes of the guards at the entrance to the cardinal's chambers, only subconsciously registering that they carried heavy-looking auto-rifles in addition to their ceremonial spears.

'Ah, Constantine,' Kodaczka murmured as the doors swung closed behind the preacher, looking up at Yakov from behind his high desk. A single laserquill and autotablet adorned its dull black surface, reflecting the sparsity of the rest of the chamber. The walls were plainly whitewashed, like most of the Amethyst Palace's interior, with a single Imperial eagle stencilled in black on the wall behind the cardinal. He was a handsome man in his middle ages, maturing with dignity and poise. Dressed in a plain black cassock, his only badge of office the small steel circlet holding back his lustrous blond hair, the cardinal was an elegant, if severe, figure. He wouldn't have looked out of place as a leading actor on the stage at the Revolutionary Theatre; with his active, bright blue eyes, chiselled cheekbones and strong chin he would have enthralled the ladies had he not had another calling.

'Good of you to see me, cardinal,' replied Yakov. At a gestured invitation from Kodaczka, the preacher sat in one of the high-backed chairs that were arranged in a semi-circle in front of the desk.

'I must admit to a small amount of surprise at receiving your missive this morning,' Prelate Kodaczka told him, leaning back in his own chair.

'You understand why I felt it necessary to talk to you?' inquired Yakov, waiting for the customary verbal thrust and parry that

accompanied all of his conversations with Kodaczka.

'Your parish and the plague? Of course I understand,' Kodaczka nodded as he spoke. He was about to continue when a knock at the door interrupted him. At Kodaczka's call they opened and a servant in the plain livery of an Ecclesiarchal servant entered with a carafe and glass on a small wooden tray.

'I suspect you are thirsty after journeying all this way,' Kodaczka indicated the drink with an open palm. Yakov nodded his thanks, pouring himself a glass of the crisp water and sipping it carefully. The servant left the tray on the desk and retired wordlessly.

'Where was I? Oh yes, the plague. It has struck many of the slave communities badly. Why have you waited until now before requesting aid?' Kodaczka's question was voiced lightly but Yakov suspected he was, as always, being tested somehow. He considered his reply for a moment, sipping more water as an excuse for not answering.

'The other slaves are not my parishioners. They are not my concern,' he said, setting the empty glass back on to the tray and raising his eyes to return the gaze of the cardinal.

'Ah, your parish, of course,' agreed Kodaczka with a smile. 'Your duty to your parishioners. And why do you think I can entreat the Governor and the Committee to act now, when they have let so many others die already?'

'I am simply performing my duty, as you say,' replied Yakov smoothly, keeping his expression neutral. 'I have made no promises other than to raise this with yourself, and I do not expect any particular success on your part. As you say, there has been an abundance of time to act before now. But still, I must ask. Will you ask the Governor and the Committee to send medical aid and staff to my parish to help defend the faithful against infection by this epidemic?'

'I will not,' Kodaczka answered curtly. 'They have already made it clear to me that not only is the expense of such resources unjustified, the lifting of the ban on full citizens entering slave areas may prove a difficult legal wrangle.'

'My congregation is dying!' barked Yakov, though in his heart he felt less vehement. 'Can you not do something to help them?'

'I will offer up prayers for them,' the cardinal responded, showing no sign of being perturbed by Yakov's outburst. Yakov caught himself before he said anything. This was one of Kodaczka's traps. The cardinal was desperate to find some reason to discredit Yakov, to disband his unique parish and send him on his way.

'As I already have,' Yakov said eventually. There was an uncomfortable silence for several seconds, both preacher and cardinal gazing at each other over the desk, weighing up the opposition. It was Kodaczka who broke the quiet.

'It irks you to preach to these slaves?' the cardinal asked suddenly.

'Slaves are entitled to spiritual guidance even by the laws of Karis Cephalon,' the preacher replied.

'That is not an answer,' Kodaczka told him gravely.

'I find the... situation on this world difficult to align with the teachings of my faith,' Yakov admitted finally.

'You find slavery against your religion?'

'Of course not!' Yakov snorted. 'It is these mutants, these creatures that I preach to. This world is built upon the exploitation of something unholy and abhorrent and I believe it denigrates everyone involved in it.'

'Ah, your Armormant upbringing,' the Prelate's voice dripped with scorn. 'So harsh and pure in intent, and yet so soft and decadent in execution.'

'We are an accepted and recognised sect within the Ministorum,' Yakov said defensively.

'Accepted? Recognised, I agree, but acceptance... That is another matter entirely,' Kodaczka said bluntly. 'Your founder, Gracius of Armorm, was charged with heresy!'

'And found innocent...' countered Yakov. He couldn't stop himself from adding, 'After a fair trial in front of his peers.'

'Yes,' agreed Kodaczka slowly, his sly smile returning once more.

YAKOV'S AUDIENCE with the cardinal had lasted most of the afternoon and once again the sun was beginning to set as he made his way back to the shantytown. As on the previous night there were many of the mutants gathered around the shrine. Rumour of his visit to the cardinal had spread and a crowd of eager faces met him. One look at his own expression quelled their anticipation and an angry murmur sprang up. It was Menevon who stepped forward, a troublemaker by nature in Yakov's opinion. He looked down at Menevon's bestial features and not for the first time wondered if he had been sired by unholy union with a dog or bear. Tufts of coarse hair sprung in patches all across his body, and his jaw was elongated and studded with tusk-like teeth stained yellow. Menevon looked back at him with small, beady eyes.

'He does nothing,' the mutant stated. 'We die and they all do nothing!'

'The Emperor's Will be done,' replied Yakov sternly, automatically echoed by some of the gathered mutants.

'The Emperor I trust and adore,' Menevon declared hotly, 'but the Governor I wouldn't spit on if he were burning.'

'That is seditious talk, Menevon, and you would do well to curb your tongue,' warned Yakov, stooping to talk quietly to the rabble-rouser.

'I say we make him help us!' shouted Menevon, ignoring Yakov and turning towards the crowd. 'It's time we made ourselves heard!'

There were discontented growls of agreement from the others, some shouted out their approval.

'Too long have they lorded over us, too long we've been ignored!' continued Menevon. 'Enough is enough! No more!'

'No more!' repeated the crowd with a guttural roar.

'Silence!' bellowed Yakov, holding his arms up to silence them. The crowd fell quiet instantly at his commanding tone. 'This discord will serve for nothing. If the Governor will not listen to me, your preacher, he will not listen to you. Your masters will not tolerate this outburst lightly. Go back to your homes and pray! Look not to the Governor, but to yourselves and the master of us all, the Holy Emperor. Go now!'



Menevon shot the preacher a murderous look as the crowd heeded his words, dispersing with backward glances and muttered curses.

'Go back to your family, Menevon, you can do them no good dead on a scaffold,' Yakov told him quietly. The defiance in the mutant's eyes disappeared and he nodded sadly. He cast a long, despairing glance at the preacher and then he too turned away.



THE TOUCH of something cold woke Yakov and when he opened his eyes his gaze fell first upon the glittering knife blade held in front of his face. Tearing his eyes away from the sharpened steel, he followed the arm to the knife's wielder and his look was met by the whitened orbs of the mutant he knew to be called Byzanthus. Like Lathesia, he was a renegade, and hunted by the Special Security Agents. His face was solemn, his eyes intent upon the preacher. The ridged and wrinkled grey skin that covered his body was dull in the silvery light which occasionally broke through the curtain swaying in the glassless window of the small chamber.

'I had your promise,' Yakov heard Lathesia speak from the shadows. A moment later she stepped forwards, her hair catching the moonlight as she passed in front of the window.

'I asked, they said no,' Yakov replied, pushing Byzanthus's arm away and sitting up, the preacher's thin blanket falling to his waist to reveal the taut muscles of his stomach and chest.

'You keep in good shape,' she commented, noticing his lean physique.

'The daily walk to the capital keeps me fit,' Yakov replied, feeling no discomfort as her penetrating gaze swept over his body. 'I must stay physically as well as spiritually fit to serve the Emperor well.'

A flickering yellow light drew the preacher's attention to the window and he rose from the thin mattress to pace over and look. Lathesia smiled at his nakedness but he ignored her; fleshly matters such as his own nudity were beneath him. Pulling aside the ragged curtain, Yakov saw the

light was from dozens of blazing torches and when he listened carefully he could hear voices raised in argument. One of them sounded like Menevon's, and as his eyes adjusted he could see the hairy mutant in the torchlight, gesticulating towards the city.

'Emperor damn him!' cursed Yakov, pushing past Lathesia to grab his robes from a chair behind her. Pulling on his vestments, he rounded on the mutant girl.

'You have put him up to this?' he demanded.

'Menevon has been an associate of mine for quite some time,' she admitted, not meeting his gaze.

'Why?' Yakov asked simply. 'The Governor will not stand for this discontent.'

'Too long we have allowed this tyranny to continue,' she said with feeling. 'Just as in the revolution, the slaves have tired of the lash. It is time to strike back.'

'The Revolutionary Council was backed by two-third's of the old king's army,' spat Yakov, fumbling in the darkness for his boots. 'You will all die.'

'Menevon's brother is dead,' Byzanthus growled from behind Yakov. 'Murdered.'

Yakov rounded on the grey-skinned man. 'You know this? For sure?'

'Unless he slit his own throat, yes!' replied Lathesia. 'The masters did this, and no one will investigate because it is just one of the slaves who has died. Justice must be served.'

'The Emperor judges us all in time,' Yakov replied instinctively. He pointed out of the window. 'And he'll be judging some of them this evening if you let this foolishness continue. Damn your souls to Chaos, don't you care that they'll die?'

'Better to die fighting,' Lathesia whispered back, 'than on our knees begging for scraps and offal.'

The preacher snarled wordlessly and hurried out through the chapel into the street. As he rounded the corner he was met by the mutant mob, their faces twisted in anger, their raucous, raging cries springing to life as they saw him. Menevon was at their head, holding a burning brand high in the air, the embodiment of the revolutionary ringleader. But he wasn't, Yakov thought bitterly, that honour

belonged to the manipulative, headstrong teenage girl back in his room.

'What in the name of the Emperor do you think you are doing?' demanded Yakov, his deep voice rising to a deafening shout over the din of the mob. They ignored him and Menevon pushed him aside as the crowd swept along the street. The preacher recognised many faces in the torchlight as the mob passed by, some of them children. He felt someone step up beside him, and he turned and saw Lathesia watching the mutants marching past, her face triumphant.

'How did one so young become so bloodthirsty?' muttered Yakov, directing a venomous glare at her before setting off after the mutants. They were moving at some speed and Yakov had to force his way through the crowd with long strides, pulling and elbowing aside mutants to get to the front. As they neared the edge of the ghetto the crowd began to slow and he broke through to the front of the mob, where he saw what had stalled their advance. Across the main thoroughfare stood a small detachment of the SSA, their grey and black uniforms dark against the glare of a troop transport's searchlamp behind them. Each cradled a shotgun in their hands, their visored helmets reflecting the flames of the torches. Yakov stopped and let the mutants swirl around him, his mouth dry with fear. Next to him the pretty young girl, Katinia, was staring at the SSA officers. She seemed to notice Yakov suddenly and looked up at the preacher with a small, uncertain smile. He didn't smile back, but focussed his attention on the law enforcers ahead.

'Turn back now. You are in violation of the Slave Encampment Laws!' screeched a voice over a loudhailer.

'No more!' shouted Menevon, hurling his torch at the security agents, his cry voiced by others. Stones and torches rattled off the cobbles and walls of the street and one of the officers went down to a thrown bottle which smashed across his darkened helmet.

'You were warned, mutant scum,' snarled the SSA officer's voice over the hailer. At some unheard command the agents raised their shotguns. Yakov hurled himself across Katinia just as gunfire exploded all around him. There were sudden screams and

shouts, a wail of agony shrieked from his left as he and the girl rolled to the ground. He felt something pluck at his robes as another salvo roared out. The mutants were fleeing, disorder reigned as they scrambled and tore at one another to fight their way clear. Bare and booted feet stamped on Yakov's fingers as he held himself over Katinia, who was mewling and sobbing beneath him. Biting back a yell of pain as a heel crushed his left thumb between two cobbles, Yakov forced himself upright. Within moments he and the girl were alone in the street.

The boulevard was littered with dead and wounded mutants. Limbs, bodies and pools of blood were scattered over the cobblestones, a few conscious mutants groaned or sobbed. To his right, a couple he had wed just after arriving were on their knees, hugging each other, wailing over the nearly unrecognisable corpse of their son. Wherever he looked, lifeless eyes stared back at him in the harsh glare of the searchlight. The SSA were picking their way through the mounds of bodies, kicking over corpses and peering at faces.

Yakov heard the girl give a ragged gasp and he looked down. Half her mother's face lay on the road almost within reach. He bent and gathered her up in his left arm, and she buried her head in his robes, weeping uncontrollably. It was then he noticed the silver helmet of a sergeant as he clambered down from the turret of the armoured car.

'You!' bellowed Yakov, pointing with his free hand at the SSA man, his anger welling up inside him. 'Come here now!'

The officer seemed to give a start and hurried over. His face was hidden by the visor of his helmet, but he seemed to be trembling.

'Take off your helmet,' Yakov commanded him, and he did so, letting it drop from quivering fingers. The man's eyes were wide with fear as he looked up at the tall preacher. Yakov felt himself getting even angrier and he grabbed the man by the throat, his long, strong fingers tightening on the sergeant's windpipe. The man gave a choked cough as Yakov used all of the leverage afforded by his height to push him down to his knees.

'You have fired on a member of the Ministorum, sergeant,' Yakov hissed. The man began to stammer something but a quick tightening of Yakov's grip silenced him. Releasing his hold, the preacher moved his hand to the top of the sergeant's head, forcing him to bow forward.

'Pray for forgiveness,' whispered Yakov, his voice as sharp as razor. The other agents had stopped the search and helmets bobbed left and right as they exchanged glances. He heard someone swearing from the crackling intercom inside the sergeant's helmet on the floor.

'Pray to the Emperor to forgive this most grievous of sins,' Yakov repeated. The sergeant started praying, his voice spilling almost incoherently from his lips, his tears splashing down his cheeks into the blood slicking the cobbles.

'Forgive me, almighty Emperor, forgive me!' pleaded the man, looking up at Yakov as he released his hold, his cheeks streaked with tears, his face a mask of terror.

'One hour's prayer every sunrise for the rest of your life,' Yakov pronounced his judgement. As he looked again at the bloodied remnants of the massacred mutants and felt the tears of Katinia soaking through his tattered priestly robes, he added, 'And one day's physical penance a week for the next five years.'

As he turned away from the horrific scene Yakov heard the sergeant retching and vomiting. Five years of self-flagellation would teach him not to fire on a preacher, Yakov thought grimly as he stepped numbly through the blood and gore.



YAKOV WAS tired and even more irritable than normal when the sun rose the next day. He had taken Katinia back to her home, where her brother was in a fitful, nightmare-laden sleep, and then returned to the site of the cold-blooded execution to identify the dead. Some of the mutants he did not recognise from his congregation, and he assumed they were more of Lathesia's misguided freedom fighters.

When he finally returned to the shantytown, the preacher saw several dozen SSA standing guard throughout the ghetto, each carrying a heavy pistol and a charged shock maul. As he dragged himself wearily up the steps to the chapel, a familiar face was waiting for him. Just outside the curtained portal stood Sparcek, the oldest mutant he knew and informal mayor-cum-judge of the ghetto. Yakov delved into his last reserves of energy as the old mutant met him halfway, his twisted, crippled body making hard work of the shallow steps.

'A grim night, preacher,' said Sparcek in his broken, hoarse voice. Yakov noticed the man's left arm was splinted and bound with bandages and he held it across his chest as much as his deformed shoulder and elbow allowed.

'You were up there?' Yakov asked, pointing limply at Sparcek's broken arm.

'This?' Sparcek glanced down and then shook his head sadly. 'No, the SSA broke into my home just after, accused me of being leader. I said they couldn't prove that and they did this, saying they needed no proof.'

'Your people need you now, before they...' Yakov's voice trailed off as his befuddled mind tried to tell him something. 'What did you just say?'

'I said they couldn't prove anything...' he started.

'That's it!' snapped Yakov, startling the old mutant.

'What? Talk sense, you're tired,' Sparcek snapped back, obviously annoyed at the preacher's outburst.

'Nothing for you to worry about,' Yakov tried to calm him with a waved hand. 'Now, I am about to ask you something, and whether you answer me or not, I need your promise that you will never tell another living souls what it is.'

'You can trust me, did I not help you when you first arrived, did I not tell you about your congregation, their secrets and traits?' Sparcek assured him.

'I need to speak to Lathesia, and quickly,' Yakov said, bending close so that he could whisper.

'The rebel leader?' Sparcek whispered back, clearly amazed. He thought for a moment before continuing. 'I cannot

promise anything but I may be able to send her word that you wish to see her.'

'Do it, and do it quickly!' insisted Yakov, laying a gentle hand on the mutant's good arm. 'With all of these trigger-happy agents around, she's bound to do something reckless and get more of your people killed. If I can speak to her, I may be able to avoid more bloodshed.'

'I will do as you ask, preacher,' Sparcek nodded as he spoke, almost to himself.



THE DANK sewers resounded with running water and constant dripping, punctuated by the odd splash as Yakov placed a booted foot in a puddle or a rat scurried past through the rivulets seeping through the worn brick walls. Ahead, the glowlamp of Byzanthus bobbed and weaved in the mutant's raised hand as he led the way to Lathesia's hidden lair. Though one of the larger drainage systems, the tunnel was still cramped for the tall preacher and his neck was sore from half an hour's constant stooping. His nose had become more accustomed to the noxious smell which had assaulted his nostrils when the grey-skinned mutant had first opened the storm drain cover, and his eyes were no used to the dim, blue glow of the lantern. He was thoroughly lost, he was sure of that, and he half-suspected that was the point of the drawn out journey. They must have been walking in circles a few times, otherwise they would be beyond the boundaries to the mutant encampment in the city proper, or out in the fields.

After several more minutes of backbreaking walking, Byzanthus finally stopped beside an access door in the sewer wall. He banged four times, paused, than banged twice more. Rusted locks squealed and the door opened a moment later on shrieking hinges.

'You should loot some oil,' Yakov couldn't stop himself from saying, earning himself and cheerless smile from Byzanthus, who waved him inside with the lantern.

There was no sign of the doorkeeper, but as Yakov preceded Byzanthus up the wooden steps just inside the door, he heard it swinging noisily shut again.

'Shy?' Yakov asked, looking at Byzanthus over his shoulder as he climbed the stairwell.

'Suspicious of you,' the mutant replied bluntly, giving him a hard stare.

The steps led them into a small hallway, decorated with flaking murals on the walls, obviously inside one of the abandoned buildings of the royal district.

'Second door on the left,' Byzanthus said curtly, indicating the room with a nod of his head as he extinguished the lamp.

Yakov strode down the corridor quickly, his hard-soled boots clacking off the cracked tiles. Just as he reached the door, it opened to reveal Lathesia, dressed in ill-fitting SSA combat fatigues.

'Come in, make yourself at home,' she said as she stepped back and took in the room with a wide sweep of her arm. The small chamber was bare except for a couple of straw pallets and a rickety table strewn with scatters of parchment and what looked like a schematic of the sewer system. The frescoes had been all but obliterated by crudely daubed black paint, which had puddle on the scuffed wooden floor. The remnants of a fire smouldered in one corner, the smoke drifting lazily out of a cracked window.

'We had to burn the carpet last winter,' Lathesia said apologetically, noting the direction of his gaze.

'And the walls?' Yakov asked, dropping his haversack onto the bare floor.

'Byzanthus, in a fit of pique when he heard we'd been found guilty of treason,' she explained hurriedly, moving quickly over the drop down on the other mattress.

'You share the same room?' Yakov asked, recoiling from her in disgust. 'Out of wedlock?'

'What of it?' she replied, genuinely perplexed.

'Is there no sin you are not guilty of?' he demanded hotly, regretting his decision to have anything to do with the wayward mutant. He fancied he could feel the fires of Chaos burning his soul as he stood there. It would take many weeks of repentance to atone for even coming here.

'Better that than freezing because we only have enough fuel to heat a few rooms,' she told him plainly before a smile broke over

her pretty face. 'You think that Byzanthus and I... Oh, Yakov, please, allow me some standards.'

'I'm sure he doesn't see it that way,' Yakov pointed out to her with a meaningful look. 'I've saw the way he looked at you in my bedchamber last night.'

'Enough of this!' Lathesia snapped back petulantly. 'I didn't ask you to come here to preach to me. You wanted to see me!'

'Yes, you are right, I did,' Yakov admitted, collecting his thoughts before continuing. 'Have you any other trouble planned for tonight?'

'What concern is it of yours, preacher?' she asked, her black eyes narrowing with suspicion.

'You must not do anything. The SSA will retaliate with even more brutal force than last time,' he warned her.

'Actually, we were thinking of killing some of them, strutting around with their bludgeons and pistols as if their laws apply here,' she replied venomously, her cracked hands balling into fists.

Yakov went over and sat down beside her slowly, meeting her gaze firmly.

'Do you trust me?' he asked gently.

'No, why should I?' she said, surprised.

'Why did you come to me before, to ask the cardinal for help?' he countered, leaning back on one hand but keeping his eyes on hers.

'Because... it was... I was desperate, it was foolish of me, I shouldn't have,' she mumbled back, turning her gaze away.

'You are nothing more than a child. Let me help you,' Yakov persisted, feeling his soul starting to roast at the edges even as he said it.

'Stop it!' she wailed suddenly, springing to her feet and backing away. 'If I don't do this, no one will help us!'

'Have it your way,' sighed Yakov, sitting upright again. 'There is more to this than the casual murder of Menevon's brother. I do not yet know what, but I need your help to find out.'

'Why do you think so?' she asked, her defiance forgotten as curiosity took over.

'You say his throat was slit?' Yakov asked and she nodded. 'Why? Any court on Karis Cephalon will order a mutant hung on the word of a citizen, so why the murder? It

must be because nobody could know who was involved, or why he died. I think her saw something or someone and was murdered so he couldn't talk.'

'But that means, if a master didn't do it...'
Lathesia started before her eyes widened in realisation. 'One of us did this? No, I won't believe it!'

'You might not have to,' Yakov countered quickly, raising his hand to calm her. 'In fact, it's unlikely. The only way we can find out is to go to where Menevon's brother died, and see what we can find.'

'He worked in one of the cemeteries not far from here, just outside the encampment boundary,' she told the preacher. 'We'll take you there.'

She half-ran, half-skipped to the open door and called through excitedly, 'Byzanthus! Byzanthus, fetch Odrik and Klain, we're going on an expedition tonight!'



THE FUNCTIONAL ferrocrete tombstones had little grandeur about them; merely rectangular slabs plainly inscribed with the name of the family. The moon was riding high in the sky as Yakov, Lathesia and the other mutants searched the graveyard for any sign of what had happened. Yakov entered the small wooden shack that served as the gravedigger's shelter, finding various picks and shovels stacked neatly in one corner. There was an unmistakable red stain on the unfinished planks of the floor, which to Yakov's untrained eye seemed to spread from near the doorway. He stood there for a moment, gazing out into the cemetery to see what was in view. It was Byzanthus who caught his attention with a waved arm, and they all gathered on him. He pointed to a grave, which was covered with a tarpaulin weighted with rocks. Lathesia gave Byzanthus a nod and he pulled back the sheeting.

The grave was deep and long, perhaps ten feet from end to end and eight feet down. Inside was a plain metal casket, wrapped in heavy chains from which hung numerous padlocks.

'Why would anyone want to lock up a coffin?' asked Lathesia, looking at Yakov.



YAKOV STOOD in one of the rooms just down the hall from where he had met Lathesia, gazing at the strange casket. The mutant leader was beside him looking at it too, a small frown creasing her forehead.

'What do you-' she started to ask before a loud boom reverberated across the building. Shouts and gunshots rang out along the corridor as the two of them dashed from the room. Byzanthus came tearing into view from the doors at the far end, a smoking shotgun grasped in his clawed hands.

'The SSA!' he shouted to them as he ran up the corridor.

'How?' Lathesia asked, but Yakov ignored her and ducked back into the room to snatch up his satchel. More gunfire rattled from nearby, punctuated by a low bellowing of pain. As the preacher returned to the corridor Byzanthus smashed him across the jaw with the butt of the shotgun, sending Yakov sprawling over the tiled floor.

'You betrayed us, Governor's lapdog!' the mutant hissed, pushing the shotgun barrel into Yakov's chest.

'Emperor forgive you!' spat the preacher, sweeping a booted foot into one of Byzanthus's knees, which cracked audibly as his legs folded under him. Yakov pounced forward and wrestled the shotgun from his grip, turning it on Lathesia as she stepped towards him.

'Believe me, this was not my doing,' he told her, backing away. 'Save yourselves!'

He took another step back and then threw the shotgun to Lathesia. Sweeping up his bag, Yakov shouldered his way through the doorway that led to the sewer stairs as she was distracted. Yakov's heart was hammering as he pounded down the steps three at a time, almost losing his footing in his haste. At the bottom someone stepped in front of him and he lashed out with his fist, feeling it connect with a cheekbone. He spun the lockwheel on the door and splashed out into the sewers,

cursing himself for ever getting involved in this mess. Two hundred years of penance wouldn't atone for what he had done. As the sounds of fighting grew closer he hurried off through the drips and puddles with long strides.



YAKOV SAT ON his plain bed in a grim mood, brooding over the previous night's and day's events. He had spent the whole day a hostage to himself in the chapel, not daring to go out into the light, where some roving SSA man might recognise him from the raid on the rebels' hideout. He had prayed for hours on end, tears in his eyes as he asked the Emperor for guidance. He had allowed himself to get involved in something beyond him. He was a simple preacher; he had no right to interfere in such matters. As his guilt-wracked day passed into evening, Yakov began to calm down. His dealings with the mutants may have been sinful, but he had discovered something strange. The chained coffin, and the murder of the mutant for what he knew about it, was at the heart of it. But what could he do? He had just decided to confess all to Prelate Kodaczka when footsteps out in the chapel attracted his attention.

Stepping into the shrine, he saw a figure knelt before the altar, head bowed. It was Lathesia, and as he approached she looked up at him, her eyes red-rimmed from weeping.

'Byzanthus is dead, hung an hour ago,' she said dully, the black orbs of her eyes catching the light of the candle on the altar. 'He held off the agents to make sure I escaped. None of the others got out.'

'I did not betray you,' Yakov told her, kneeling beside her.

'I know,' she said, turning to him and laying a hand on his knee.

'I want to find out what is in that coffin,' Yakov said after a few moments of silence between them. 'Will you help me?'

'I watched them. They didn't take it anywhere,' she replied distractedly, wiping at a tear forming in her eye.

'Then will you go back there with me?' he asked, standing up again and reaching a hand down to help her up.

'Yes, I will,' she answered quietly. 'I want to know why they died.'



THEY TOOK THE overground route to the old aristocratic household, Lathesia leading him up a fire escape ladder onto a neighbouring rooftop. From there they could see two SSA stationed at the front entrance and another at the tradesman's entrance to the rear. She showed him the ropeline hung between the buildings, tied there for escape rather than entry, but suitable all the same. Yakov kept his gaze firmly on his hands as he pulled himself along the rope behind the lithe young rebel leader, trying not to think of the thirty-foot drop to the hard road beneath him. As she helped him onto the rooftop of her one-time lair, a gentle cough from the darkness made them freeze. Out of the shadows strolled a man swathed in a heavy coat, his breath carving mist into the chill evening air.

'A strange pastime for a preacher,' he said as he stepped towards them, hands in the pockets of his trenchcoat.

'Who are you?' demanded Lathesia, his hand straying to the revolver wedged into the waistband of her trousers at the small of her back.

'Please don't try to shoot me,' he replied calmly, 'You'll attract some unwanted attention.'

'Who are you?' Yakov repeated the question, stepping between the stranger and Lathesia.

'An investigator, for the Inquisition,' he told them stopping a couple of paces away.

'An inquisitor?' Lathesia hissed, panic in her eyes.

'Calm yourself; your little rebellion doesn't concern me tonight,' he assured her, pulling his hands free from the coat and crossing his arms. 'And I didn't say I was an inquisitor.'

'You are after the casket as well?' Yakov guessed, and the man nodded slightly.

'Shall we go and find it, then?' the investigator invited them, turning and walking away.



THE SCENE before Yakov could have been taken straight from a drawing in the Liber Heresius. Twelve robed and masked figures knelt in a circle around the coffin, five braziers set at the points of a star drawn around the casket. The room was filled with acrid smoke and the sonorous chanting of the cultists filled the room. One of them stood and pulled back his hood, and Yakov almost gasped out loud when he recognised the face of the Governor. Holding his arms wide, he chanted louder, the words a meaningless jumble of syllables to the preacher.

'I think we've seen enough,' the investigator said, crouched beside Yakov and Lathesia on the patio outside the room. He drew two long las-pistols from holsters inside his coat and offered one to Yakov. Yakov shook his head.

'Surely you're not opposed to righteous violence, preacher?' the stranger said with a raised eyebrow.

'No,' Yakov replied. Pulling his rucksack off, the preacher delved inside and a moment later pulled out a black enamelled pistol. With years of practice he slipped home the magazine and cocked the gun. 'I just prefer to use my own weapon.'

Lathesia gaped in astonishment.

'What?' asked Yakov, annoyed. 'You think they call us the Defenders of the Faith just because it sounds good?'

'Shoot to kill!' rasped the stranger as he stood up.

He fired both pistols, shattering the windows and spraying glass shards into the room. A couple of the cultists pulled wicked-looking knives from their rope belts and leapt at them. The Governor dived behind the casket, shrieking madly.

Yakov's first shot took a charging cultist in the chest, punching him off his feet. His second blew the kneecap off another, his third taking him in the forehead as he collapsed. The investigator's las-pistols spat bolts of light into the cultists fleeing for the door, while the boom of Lathesia's heavy

pistol echoed off the walls. As Yakov stepped into the room, one of the cultists pushed over a brazier and he jumped to his right to avoid the flaming coals. A las bolt took the traitor in the eye, vaporising half his face.

In a few moments the one-sided fight was over, all the cultists were dead, their blood soaking into the bare boards. Suddenly, the Governor burst from his hiding place and bolted for the door, but Lathesia was quicker, tackling him to the ground. He thrashed for a moment before she smashed him across the temple with the grip of her revolver. She was about to pistol-whip him again but the stranger grabbed her wrist in mid-swing.

'My masters would prefer he survived for interrogation,' he told, letting go of her arm and stepping back.

Lathesia hesitated for a moment before standing. She delivered a sharp kick to the man's midriff before stalking away, emptying spent casings from her gun.

'I have no idea what is going on here,' Yakov confessed, sliding the safety into place on his own pistol.

'No reason you should,' the man assured him. 'I supposed I do owe you an explanation though.'

Slipping his las-pistols back into his coat, the man leant back on the wall.

'The plague has been engineered by the Governor's and his allies,' the investigator told him. 'He wanted the mutants to rebel, to try to overthrow him. While Karis Cephalon remains relatively peaceful, the Imperial authorities and the Inquisition are content to ignore the more-or-less tolerant attitude to mutants found here. But should they threaten the stability of the world, they would be swift and ruthless in their response.'

The man glanced over his shoulder at Lathesia, who was intent on the casket, then looking Yakov squarely in the eye before continuing quietly. 'But that's not the whole of it. So the mutants are wiped out, that's really no concern of the Inquisition. But the Governor's motives are what concern us. I – that is, we – believe that he has made some kind of pact with a dark force, some kind of unholy elevation. His side of the deal was the delivery of a massive sacrifice, a whole

population, genocide of the mutants. But he couldn't just have them culled. The entire economy of Karis Cephalon is based on mutant labour and no one would allow him to threaten their prosperity. So, he imported a virus which feeds on mutants. It's called Aether Mortandis and costs a lot of money to acquire from the Mechanicus.'

'And the coffin?' Yakov asked. 'Where does that fit in?'

'It doesn't, not at all!' the stranger laughed bitterly. 'I was hiding it when the gravedigger saw me. I killed him, but unfortunately before I had time to finish the burial, his cries brought an SSA patrol and I had to leave. It's just coincidence.'

'So what's so important about it then?' Yakov eyed the casket with suspicion. Lathesia was toying with one of the locks, a thoughtful look on her face.


'I wouldn't open that if I were you,' the stranger spoke up, startling the girl who dropped the padlock and stepped back. The investigator put an arm around Yakov's shoulders and pulled him close, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

'The reason the Governor has acted now is because of a convergence of energies on Karis Cephalon,' the man told Yakov slowly. 'Mystical forces, astrological conjunctions are forming, with Karis Cephalon at its centre. For five years, the barrier between our world and the hell of Chaos will grow thinner and thinner. Entities will be able to break through, aliens will be drawn here, and death and disaster will plague this world on an unparalleled scale. It will be hell incarnate at times. If you wish, for your help today I can arrange a transfer to a parish on another world, get you way from here.'

Yakov looked at the man for a minute, searching his own soul.

'If what you say is true,' he said eventually, 'then I respectfully decline the offer. It seems men of faith will be a commodity in much need over the coming years.'

He looked up at Lathesia, who was looking at them from across the room.

'And,' Yakov finished, 'my parishioners will need me more than ever.' 

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BOYZ AT DEFF
SKWADRON...

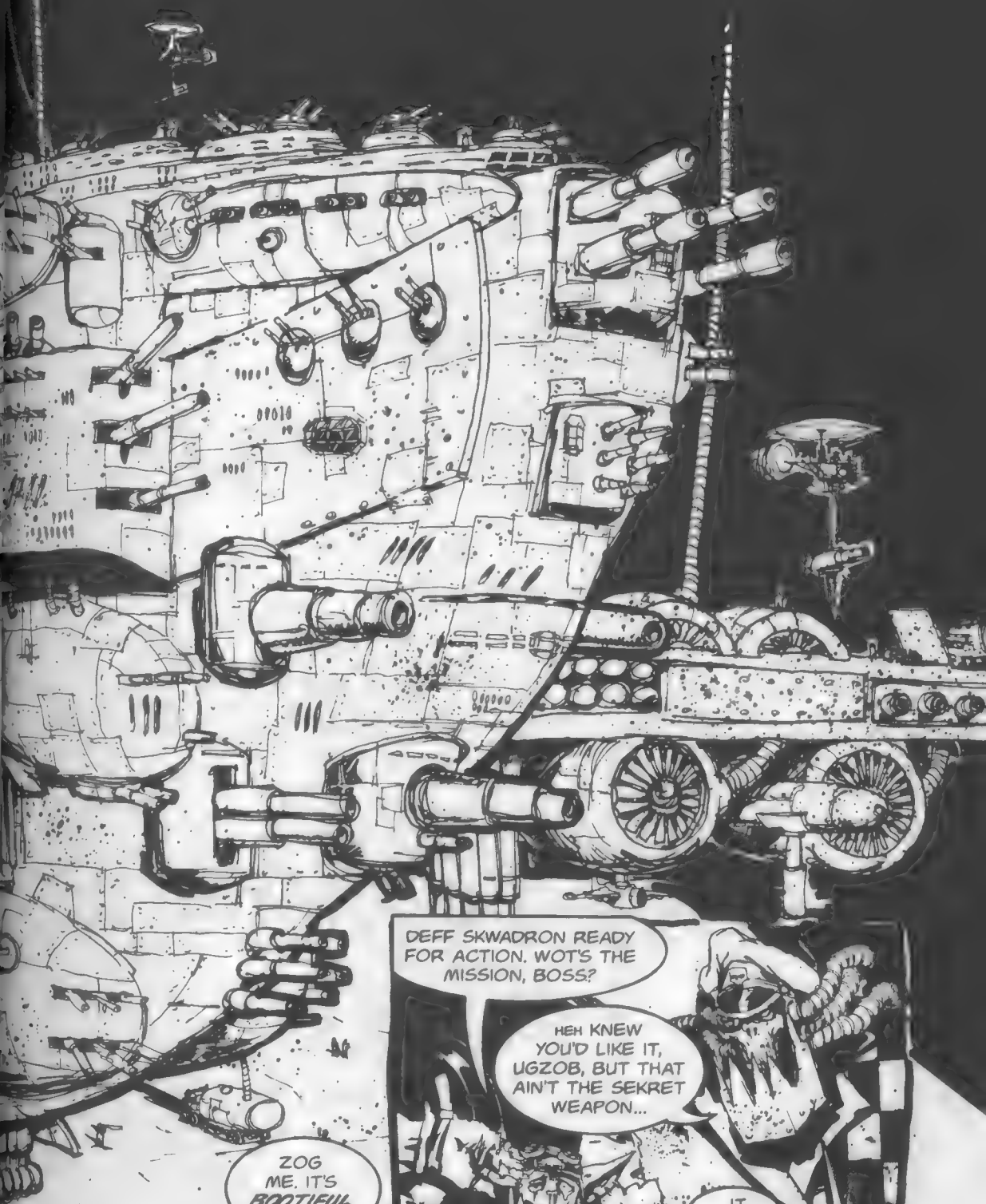
SPECIAL MISSION,
BOSS? UH... IT WOULDN'T
AVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH
TRYIN' OUT ANY NEW
MEKBOY SEKRET
WEAPONZ...?

HEH HEH. THAT IT
DOES, UGZOB. THAT
IT DOES!



SO, UGZOB, WOT
DO YA THINK OF
IT...?

FLAMIN'
MORK, BOSS... IT'S - IT'S -



ZOG
ME. IT'S
BOOTIFUL

DEFF SKWADRON READY
FOR ACTION. WOT'S THE
MISSION, BOSS?

HEH KNEW
YOU'D LIKE IT,
UGZOB, BUT THAT
AIN'T THE SEKRET
WEAPON...


IT
AIN'T?

NAH...




"IT'S THE **PAYLOAD** THAT'S SPECIAL, AN' I WANT YOU AN' YOUR BOYZ TO FLY A **BOMMIN'** MISSION AN' DROP IT ON THE **HEADQUARTERS** OF THAT **SNEAKY GIT, GRINLUG!**"

UZGOB TO BOMMER KREW.
CHECK ALL GUBBINZ.



KILLBOY,
THEM **NOSE TURRET KANNONS** WORKIN' PROPER?

DON'T KNOW, SIR. I'VE NOT SHOT ANYTHING DOWN WITH THEM YET!



SO WHO'S THAT FLYIN' UP AHEAD THERE?

RAZNUTS, SIR.

HEH HEH THERE YA GO, THEN...

VERY WELL, SIR. COMMENCING **NOSE KANNON** TEST NOW!

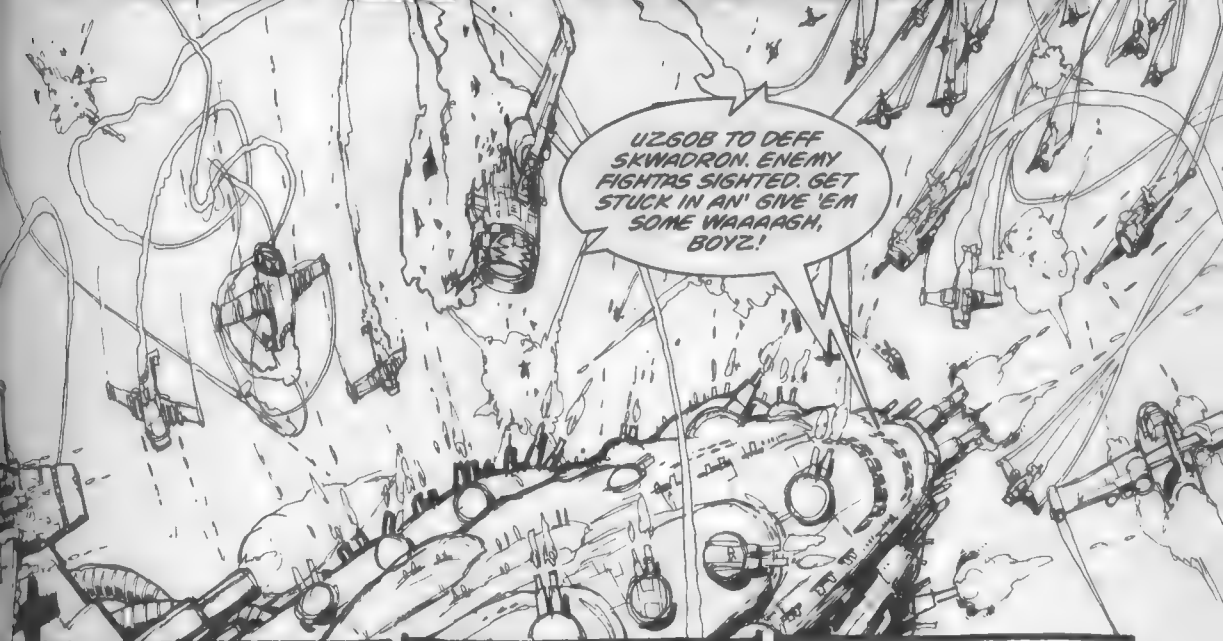
DAKKA
DAKKA

DAKKA
DAKKA
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DAKKA

NOSE KANNON TESTING SUCCESSFUL, SIR.

GLAD TO 'EAR IT, KILLBOY...



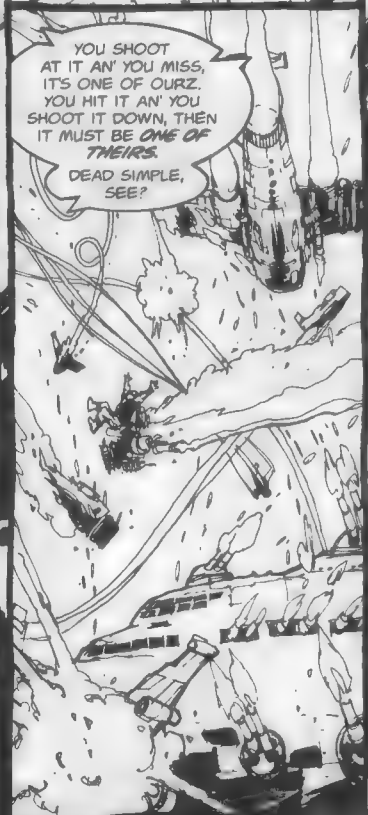
U260B TO DEFF SKWADRON. ENEMY FIGHTAS SIGHTED. GET STUCK IN AN' GIVE 'EM SOME WAAAASH, BOYZ!



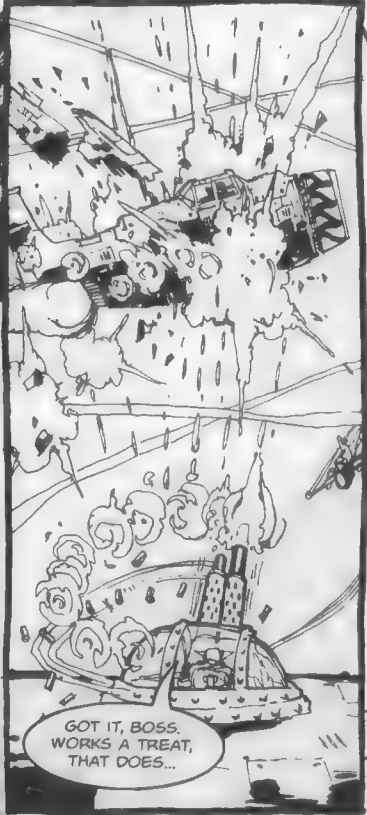
TOPSIDE TURRETS! WHICH ONE OF YOU GITZ ISN'T SHOOTIN' LIKE ALL THE OTHERS..!?

ME, BOSS. 'OW WE SUPPOSED TO KNOW WHO'S ON OUR SIDE AND WHO AIN'T?

LISTEN KAREFULLY AND I'LL EXPLAIN 'OW WE DO THINGS 'ERE IN DEFF SKWADRON...



YOU SHOOT AT IT AN' YOU MISS, IT'S ONE OF OURZ. YOU HIT IT AN' YOU SHOOT IT DOWN, THEN IT MUST BE ONE OF THEIRS. DEAD SIMPLE, SEE?



GOT IT, BOSS. WORKS A TREAT, THAT DOES...



FRAGGIN' ROOKIES. DON'T THEY TEACH 'EM NUTHIN' IN *TRAININ' SKOOL* THESE DAYS?

WE'VE GOT A *TRAININ' SKOOL*? 'OW LONG'S THAT BEEN GOIN' ON THEN, BOSS?



APPROACHIN' TARGET AREA, GIMZOD. WHY THE ZOG AIN'T 'EM *BOMB BAY DOORZ* OPEN YET?

BEG PARDON, BOSS, BUT WE'RE 'AVIN' SOME TROUBLE DOWN 'ERE WIV THE *PAYLOAD*...



THEN GET THE *BOMMBADEER BOYZ* TO FIX IT!

CAN'T DO THAT, BOSS, SEENIN' AS 'OW THE *PAYLOAD* ALREADY *ATE* 'EM...



ATE 'EM! WOT THE FRAG YOU TALKIN' 'BOUT, GIMZOD!

THAT'S WOT I'M TRYIN' TO TELL YOU...



THE PAYLOAD...
IT'S *SQUIGS*, AN'
REAL NASTY THEY ARE
TOO! MUST BE SOME
KINDA SPECIAL NEW
BREED!

'ANG ON,
GIMZOD. ELP'S
ON THE WAY.



KILLBOY...

BEGGIN' YOUR
PARDON, SIR, LEAVE
IT TO ME...



ALMOST OVER
THE TARGET. HURRY
UP AND GET THEM
BOMB DOORZ
OPEN!

WORKIN'
ON IT NOW,
BOSS...

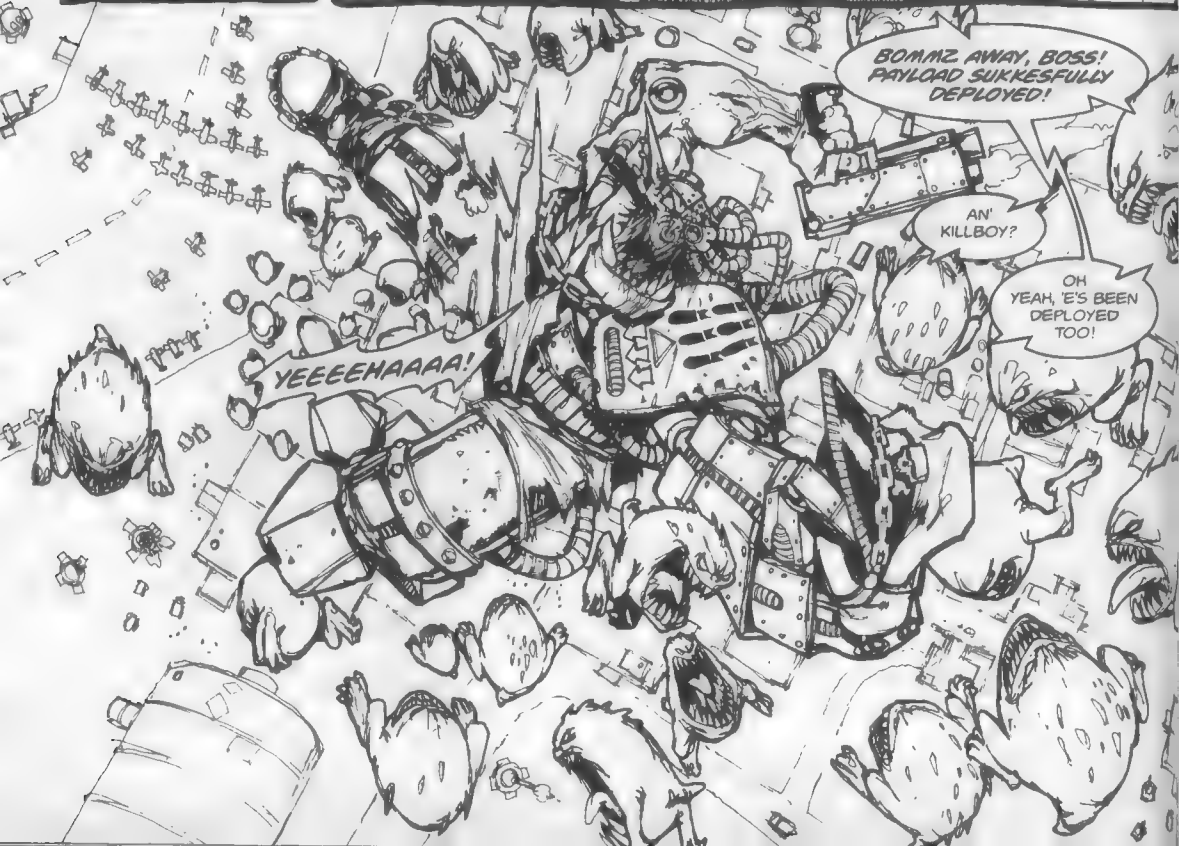
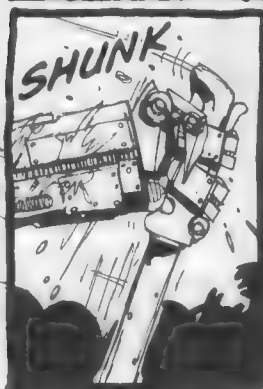


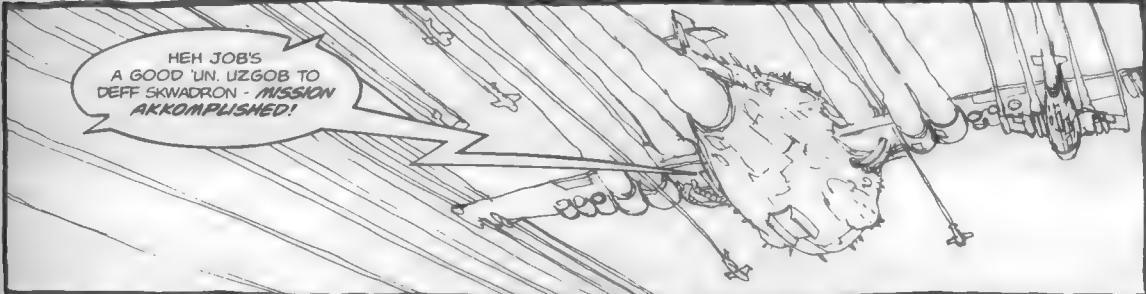
LITTLE BLIGHTERS MUST 'AVE BIT
THROUGH THE HYDRAULIKS.
KILLBOY'S GOIN' DOWN THERE
TO OPERATE THE MANUAL
RELEASE!

NEH GOOD OL'
KILLBOY. PERFECT
BOY FOR THE
JOB...



'E'S GOT SO
MANY BIONIK BITZ,
THERE'S HARDLY
ENOUGH OF 'IM LEFT
FOR 'EM TO CHEW
ON!






HEH JOB'S
A GOOD 'UN. UZGOB TO
DEFF SKWADRON - MISSION
AKKOMPLISHED!




AIN'T
YOU WORRIED
BOSS?

'BOUT
KILLBOY?
NAH...



"IT'S THEM POOR
GITZ DOWN THERE
I'M THINKIN' ABOUT..."



"THEY THINK THEY GOT
PROBLEMS NOW WIV THE
SQUIGS, JUST WAIT TILL
OL' KILLBOY GETS DOWN
THERE AMONGST 'EM!"

THE END



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A CHOICE OF HATREDS

BY C. L. WERNER

ON THE OUTSKIRTS of the small town of Kleinsdorf, a group of raucous men gathered in a fallow field. Before them stood an inverted anvil upon which a burly man garbed in a heavy blacksmith's apron set a second anvil. The man's bearded face split into a booming laugh as one of his comrades lit a hemp fuse that slithered between the anvils to reach a small charge of gunpowder. A hushed silence fell upon the men as the smouldering flame slowly burned its way to the explosive. Suddenly a tremendous boom echoed across the barren fields and the uppermost anvil was thrown into the sky to crash into the ground several yards away. A great cheer erupted from the group and the blacksmith set off at a lumbering jog to retrieve the heavy iron projectile even as one of his friends prepared another charge.

'It looks like we have chanced into a bit of a celebration, eh Mathias?' commented a stout, bearded rider on the road overlooking the anvil-firing party. The man wore a battered and ill-mended pair of leather breeches, an equally battered jerkin of studded leather struggling to contain the man's slight paunch. Greasy, swine-like eyes peered from either side of a splayed nose while an unkempt beard clothed his forward-jutting jaw. From a scabbard at his side a broadsword swayed with each step of his horse.

'We come here seeking rest, friend Streng, not to indulge your penchant for debauchery,' replied the second rider. A tall, grim figure, the second man was his companion's senior by at least a decade. Where Streng's attire was shabby and worn, this man's was opulent and immaculate shiny leather boots rose to the man's knees and his back was enveloped by a heavy black cape lined with the finest ermine... Fine calfskin gauntlets garbed slender-fingered hands while a tunic of red satin embroidered with gold clothed his arms and chest. The wide rounded brim of his leather hat cast shadow upon

the rider's features. Depending from a dragonskin belt with an enormous silver buckle were a pair of holstered pistols and a slender-bladed longsword.

'You are the one who has taken so many fine vows to Sigmar,' Streng said with a voice that was not quite a sneer. 'I recall taking no such vows.'

Mathias turned to look at his companion and his face emerged from the shadow cast by the brim of his hat. The older man's face was gaunt, dominated by a narrow dagger-like nose and the thin moustache that rested between it and the man's slender lips. A grey patch of beard stabbed out from the man's chin. The man's eyes were of similar colour but burnt with a strange intensity, a determination and zeal that were at odds with the glacial hue.

'You make no vows to Sigmar, yet you take the Temple's gold easily enough,' Mathias locked eyes with his comrade. Some of the glib disrespect in Streng's manner dissipated as he met that gaze.

'I've not seen many monks with so fine a habit as yours,' Streng said, turning his eyes away from his companion.

'It is sometimes wise to remind people that Sigmar rewards service in this life as well as the hereafter,' Mathias looked away from his henchman and stared at the town before them.

A small settlement of some thousand persons, the simple wooden structures were close together, the streets narrow and crooked. Everywhere there was laughter and singing, music from mandolin and fife. A celebratory throng choked the streets, dancing with recklessness born more of joy than drink, at least in this early hour of the festival. Yet, none were so reckless as not to make way for Mathias as he manoeuvred his steed into the narrow streets nor to make the sign of Sigmar's Hammer with the witch hunter's passing.

'I shall take room at the inn. You find a stable for the horses,' Mathias said as he and Streng rode through the crowd.

'And then?' asked Streng, a lustful gleam in his eyes and a lecherous grin splitting his face.

'I care not what manner of sin you find fit to soil your soul with,' snarled the witch hunter, 'just see that your are in condition to ride at cock's crow.'

As they talked, the pair did not observe the stealthy figure who watched their exchange from the behind a hay-laden wagon. They did not see the same figure emerge from its hiding place with their passing nor the venomous glare it sent after them.

when Gustav's eyes observed the countenance of his new guest. The high black hat, flowing cape, and expensive weapons combined with the stern visage of the man's face told Gustav what this man was even before he saw the burning gleam in those cold grey eyes.

'I am sorry, my lord, but I am afraid that I have no rooms that are free,' Gustav winced as the witch hunter's eyes stared into his own. 'The... the festival. It brings many guests. If you had only come on another night...' the innkeeper stammered.

'Your common room is also filled?' the witch hunter interrupted.

'Why, no,' Gustav said, a nervous tic causing his left eye to twitch uncontrollably.

'Then you may move one of your guests to the common room,' the witch hunter declared. Gustav nodded his agreement even as he inwardly cursed the man. The common room was a long hall at the side of the inn lined with pallets of straw. Even drunkards would be unwilling to pay much for such lodgings.

'You may show me my room,' the witch hunter said, his firm hand grasping Gustav's shoulder and pushing the innkeeper ahead of himself. 'I trust that you have something appropriate for a devoted servant of Sigmar?'

'Yes, my lord,' Gustav said, altering his course away from the closet-like chamber he had thought to give the witch hunter. He led the way up a flight of stairs to one of the larger rooms. The witch hunter peered into the chamber while the innkeeper held the door open.

'No, I think not,' the witch hunter declared. The bearded face moved closer toward Gustav's own and one of the gloved fingers touched the twitching muscle beside the innkeeper's eye.

'Interesting,' Mathias said, not quite under his breath. The innkeeper's eyes grew wide with fright, seeming to see the word 'mutation' forming in the witch hunter's mind.

'A nervous twitch, nothing more,' Gustav muttered, knowing that even so slight a physical defect had put men to the

GUSTAV SIPPED at the small glass of Tilean wine listening to the sounds of merriment beyond the walls of his inn. A greedy glint came to the innkeeper's eyes as he thought of the vacant rooms above his head and the drunken men who would fill them before the night was through. The Festival of Wilhelmstag brought many travellers to Kleinsdorf, travellers who would find themselves too drunk or too fatigued to quit the town once the festivities reached their end. Few would be lucid enough to haggle over the 'competitive' fee Gustav charged his annual Wilhelmstag guests.

Gustav again sipped at his wine, silently toasting Wilhelm Hoess and the minotaur lord which had been kind enough to let itself and its horde of Chaos-spawn be slaughtered in the streets of Kleinsdorf two centuries past. Even now, the innkeeper could see the gilded skull of the monster atop a pole in the centre of the square outside, torchlight from the celebratory throng below it dancing across the golden surface. Gustav hoped that the minotaur was enjoying the view, for tomorrow the skull would return to a chest in the town hall, there to reside until next Wilhelmstag.

The opening of the inn's front door roused the innkeeper from his thoughts. Gustav smiled. *The first sheep comes to be fleeced*, he thought as he scuttled away from the window. But the smile died

stake in many backwater towns. 'I have a much nicer room, if you would follow me.' Gustav turned leading the witch hunter to a second flight of stairs.

'Yes, this will do,' Mathias stated when Gustav led him into a large and well-furnished room at the top of the inn. Gustav smiled and nodded his head nervously.

'It is my honour to serve a noble Templar of Sigmar,' the innkeeper said as he walked to the large oak wardrobe that dominated one corner of the room. Gustav opened the wardrobe and removed his nightshirt and cap from it.

'I will dine here,' Mathias declared, settling into a large chair and removing his weapon-laden belt. 'A goose and some wine, I think.' The witch hunter stroked his moustache with his thumb and forefinger.

'I will see to it,' the innkeeper said, knowing better than to challenge his most-unwanted guest. Gustav paused a few steps away from the witch hunter. Mathias reached into a pocket in the lining of his tunic and tossed a few coins into the man's hands. Gustav stared stupidly at them for several seconds.

'I did not come for the festival,' explained Mathias, 'so I should not have to pay festival prices.' The witch hunter suddenly cocked his head and stared intently at Gustav's twitching eye.

'I shall see about your supper,' Gustav whimpered as he hurried from the room.



THE STREETS OF Kleinsdorf were alive with rejoicing. Everywhere there was dancing and singing. But all the laughter and joy in the world could not touch the figure that writhed its way through the crowd. The dark, shabby cloak of the man, meant to keep him inconspicuous, was at odds with the bright fabrics and flowers of the revellers and made him stand out all the more. Dozens of times Reinhardt von Lichtberg had been forced to ward away garishly clad townspeople who thought to exorcise this wraith of melancholy in their midst with dance and drink. Reinhardt spat into

the dust. A black-hearted murderer had descended upon this place and all these idiots could do was dance and laugh. Well, if things turned out as Reinhardt planned, he too would have cause to dance and laugh. Before they stretched his neck from a gallows.

Hands clasped Reinhardt's shoulders and spun the young man around. So lost in thoughts of revenge was he that Reinhardt did not even begin to react before warm, moist lips closed about his own. The woman detached herself from Reinhardt and stared up into the young man's face.

'I do not believe that I know you,' Reinhardt said as his eyes considered the golden-haired, well-built woman smiling impishly at him and the taste of ale that covered his lips.

'You could,' the woman smiled. 'The Festival of Wilhelmstag is a time for finding new people.'

Reinhardt shook his head. 'I am looking for no one new.' Reinhardt found himself thinking again of Mina and how she had died. And how her murderer would die.

'You have not seen a witch hunter, by any chance?' Reinhardt asked. The woman's smile turned into a full-lipped pout.

'I've met his surrogate,' the girl swore. 'Over at the beer hall, drinking like an orc and carrying on like a Tilean sailor. Mind you, no decent woman had better get near him.' The impish smile returned and the woman pulled scandalously at the torn fringe of her bodice. 'See what the brute did to me.'

Reinhardt's grabbed the woman's arms in a vice-like grip.

'Did he say where Mathias Thulmann, the witch hunter, is?' Reinhardt snarled. The coyness left the woman's face as the drunken haze was replaced by something approaching fear.

'The inn, he was taking a room at the inn.' The girl retreated into the safety of the crowd as Reinhardt released her. The nobleman did not even notice her go, his mind already processing the information she had given him. His right hand slid beneath the shabby cloak and closed around the hilt of his sword.

'Soon, Mina,' Reinhardt whispered, 'soon your murderer will discover what suffering is.'

GERHART KNAUF had never known terror such as he now felt. The wonderful thrill of fear that he enjoyed when engaging in his secret activities was gone. The presence of the witch hunter had driven home the seriousness of discovery in a way that Knauf had never fully comprehended before. The shock and looks of disbelief he had visualised on his neighbours' faces when they realised that the merchant was more than he seemed had become the frenzied visages of a bloodthirsty mob. Knauf could even smell the kindling as it caught flame.

The calf-eyed merchant with his beetle-like brow downed the tankard resting on the bar before him in a single bolt. Knauf pressed a hand against his mouth, struggling to keep the beer from leaving his body as quickly as it had entered it. The merchant managed to force the bile back into his stomach and let his head sway towards the man sitting beside him.

'Mueller,' croaked Knauf, his thin voice struggling to maintain a semblance of dignity, even as he struggled against fear and inebriation. The heavy set mercenary at his side looked away from the gob of wax he had been whittling into a lewd shape and regarded the merchant.

'You have done jobs for me before,' Knauf continued.

'Aye,' the mercenary cautiously replied, fingering his knife.

'And I have always paid you fairly and promptly,' the merchant added, his head swaying from side to side like some bloated reptile.

'That is true enough,' Mueller said, a smirk on his face. The truth of it was that Knauf was too timid to be miserly when it came to paying the men who protected his wagons. A cross look from Rall, or Gunther, or even from the scarecrow-like Hossbach and the mercenaries would see an increase in their wages.

'Would you say that we are friends?' Knauf said, reaching for another ceramic tankard of beer. He swallowed only half the tankard's contents this time, spilling most of the remainder when he clumsily set the vessel back upon the table.

'Were you to pay me enough, I would even say that we were brothers,' Mueller replied, struggling to contain the laughter building within his gut. But the condescending sarcasm in the mercenary's voice was lost on the half-drunken Knauf. The merchant caught hold of Mueller's arm and stared into his face with pleading eyes.

'Would you murder for me?' the merchant hissed. This time Mueller did laugh.

'By Ulric's fangs,' Gerhart,' the mercenary swore, 'who could you possibly hate enough to need killed?' Mueller laughed again and downed his own tankard of beer.

'The witch hunter,' whispered Knauf, his head swaying from side to side to ensure that no one had overheard.

'Have you been reading things you shouldn't?' Mueller asked, only half-seriously. The look of fear in Knauf's eyes killed the joke forming on the mercenary's lips. Mueller rose from his chair and stared down at the merchant.

'Forty gold crowns,' the mercenary declared, waving away the look of joy and hope crawling across Knauf's features. 'And as far as the boys are concerned, you are paying us ten.' Mueller turned away from the table and started to walk into the main room of the beer hall.

'Where are you going?' Knauf called after Mueller in a voice that sounded unusually shrill even for the merchant.

'To get Hossbach and the others,' Mueller said. 'Maybe I'll see if I can't learn something about our friend as well.' The mercenary turned away. He only got a few steps before Knauf's drunken hands were scrabbling at the man's coat.

'How are you going to do that?' Knauf hissed with alarm. Mueller extracted himself from the merchant's grip. He pointed a finger to the far end of the beer hall where a bawdy song and shrieks of

mock indignation from the crowd that had gathered in morbid fascination around the man who had rode into Kleinsdorf with the witch hunter.

'How else? I'll speak with his lackey,' Mueller shook his head as Knauf started to protest. 'Leave this to me. Why don't you go home and get my gold ready?' The mercenary did not wait to see if Knauf would follow his suggestion, but continued across the beer hall, liberating a metal stein from a buxom bar maid along the way.

'Sometimes they confess straight away,' Streng was saying as Mueller inconspicuously joined his audience. 'That's the worst of it. There's nothing left to do but string them up, or burn them if they've been particularly bad.' Streng paused to smile at the woman sitting on his knee.

'So how do you go about finding a witch?' Mueller interrupted Streng's carousing. The lout turned to Mueller and regarded him with an irritated sneer.

'I don't. That's the Templar's job. Mathias finds them and then I make them confess. That way everything is above board and the Temple can burn the filthy things without anybody being upset.' Streng turned away from Mueller and returned his attention to his companion.

'So your master has come to Kleinsdorf looking for witches?' Mueller interrupted again.

Streng shook his head and glared at this man who insisted on intruding on his good time.

'Firstly, Mathias Thulmann is not my master. We're partners, him and me. Secondly, we are on our way to Stirland. Lots of witches down in Stirland.' Streng snorted derisively. 'Do you honestly think we'd cross half the Empire to come here?' Streng laughed. 'I wouldn't cross a meadow to come to this rat nest,' he said, before adding, 'present company excepted of course,' to the locals gathered around him.

As Streng returned his attention to the giggling creature seated on his knee, Mueller extracted himself from the hangers-on and made his way toward the

beer hall's exit. The mercenary spied a familiar face in the crowd and waved the man over to him. A young, wiry man with a broken nose and a scar across his forearm walked over to Mueller. The mercenary took the flower-festooned hat from the man's head and sent it sailing across the crowded room with a flick of his wrist.

'Go get Gunther and Hossbach,' Mueller snarled. 'I found us some night work.' The angry look on the young man's face disappeared at the mention of work. Rall set off at a brisk jog to find his fellow sellswords. Mueller looked at the crowd around Streng one last time before leaving the beer hall.

The mercenary had found out all that he needed to know. The witch hunter was only passing through Kleinsdorf; he would not be expecting any trouble. Like all the other jobs he had done for Gerhart Knauf, this one would hardly be difficult enough to be called work.



A CHEER WENT UP from the crowd below as a small boy shimmied up the massive pole standing in the centre of the square and thrust a crown of flowers on the gilded skull at its top. At the moment, Reinhardt von Lichtberg envied the boy his agility. The nobleman was gripping the outer wall of the inn, thirty feet above the square. To an observer, he might have looked like a great brown bat clinging to the wall of a cave. But there were no eyes trained upon Reinhardt, at least not at present. The few revellers who had lifted their heads skyward were watching the boy descend the pole with a good deal less bravado than he had ascended with. Still, the threat of discovery was far too real and Reinhardt was not yet ready to see the inside of a cell.

Slowly, carefully, Reinhardt worked his fingers from one precarious handhold to another. Only a few feet away he could see the window that was his goal. It had been easy to determine which room the murderer occupied; his was the only window from which light shone. Somehow it did not surprise Reinhardt

that the witch hunter had taken a room on the inn's top floor. One last trial, one final obstacle before vengeance could be served.

At last he reached the window and Reinhardt stared through the glass, seeing for the first time in six months the man who had destroyed his life. The murderer sat in a wooden chair, a small table set before him. He cut morsels from a large roasted goose, a wicker-shrouded bottle of wine sitting beside it. Reinhardt watched for a moment as the monster ate, burning the hated image of the man into his memory. He hoped that the meal was a good one, for it would be the witch hunter's last.



WITH AN ANIMAL cry, Reinhardt crashed through the window, broken glass and splintered wood flying across the room. Landing on his feet, the sword at his side was in his hand in less than a heartbeat. To his credit, the witch hunter reacted swiftly, kicking the small table at Reinhardt an instant after he landed in the room while diving in the opposite direction to gain the pistols and longsword that lie upon the bed. But Reinhardt had the speed of youth and the martial training of one who might have been a captain in the Reiksguard on his side. More, he had purpose.

The witch hunter's claw-like hand closed around the grip of his pistol just as cold steel touched his throat. There was a brief pause as Thulmann regarded the blade poised at his neck before releasing his weapon and holding his hands up in surrender. Both arms raised above his head, Mathias Thulmann faced the man with a sword at his throat.

'I fear that you will not find much gold,' Mathias said, his voice low and unafraid.

'You do not remember me, do you?' Reinhardt snarled. 'Or are you going to pretend that your name is not Mathias Thulmann, Templar of Sigmar, witch hunter?'

'That is indeed my name, and my trade,' replied Mathias, his voice unchanged.

'My name is Reinhardt von Lichtberg,' spat Reinhardt, pressing the tip of his blade into Mathias's throat until a bead of crimson slid down the steel. 'I am the man who is going to kill you.'

'To avenge your lost love?' the witch hunter mused, a touch of pity seeming to enter his voice. 'You should thank me for restoring her soul to the light of Sigmar.'

'Thank you?' Reinhardt bellowed incredulously. The youth fought to keep himself from driving his sword through the witch hunter's flesh. 'Thank you for imprisoning us, torturing us? Thank you for burning Mina at the stake? Thank you for destroying the only thing that made my life worth living?' Reinhardt clenched his fist against the wave of agony and rage that pounded through his body. He shook his head from side to side.

'We were to be married,' the nobleman stated. 'I was to serve the Emperor in his Reiksguard and win glory and fame. Then I would return and she would be waiting for me to make her my wife.' Reinhardt pulled a fat skinning knife from a sheath on his belt. 'You took that from me. You took it all away.' Reinhardt let the light play across the knife in his left hand as he rolled his wrist back and forth. The witch hunter continued to watch him, his eyes hooded, his face betraying no fear or even concern. Reinhardt noted the man's seeming indifference to his fate.

'You will scream,' he swore. 'Before I let you die, Sigmar himself will hear your screams.'

The hand with the knife moved toward the witch hunter's body...

And for the second time that evening, Mathias Thulmann had unexpected visitors.



THE DOOR BURST inwards, bludgeoned from its hinges by the ogre-like man who followed the smashed portal into the room. Three other men were close behind the ape-like bruiser. All four of them wore a motley array of piecemeal armour, strips of chainmail fastened to leather tunics,

bands of steel woven to a padded hauberk. The only aspect that seemed to link the four men was the look of confusion on their faces.

'The witch hunter was supposed to be alone,' stated Rall, puzzled by the strange scene they had stumbled upon. Reinhardt turned his body toward the mercenaries, keeping his sword at Mathias's throat.

'Which one is he?' asked Rall, clearly not intending the question for either of the men already in the room.

'Why don't we just kill them both?' the scarecrow-thin figure of Hossbach said, stepping toward Reinhardt.

Like a lightning bolt, the skinning knife went flying across the room. Hossbach snarled as he dodged the projectile. The mercenary did not see the sword that flashed away from Thulmann's throat to slice across his armour and split his stomach across its centre. Hossbach toppled against the man who had dealt him the fatal wound. His sword forgotten on the floor, the mercenary clutched at Reinhardt, grabbing for the man's sword arm. Reinhardt kicked the dying man away from him, sending him crashing into the foot of the bed, but Hossbach had delayed him long enough. The brutish fist of Gunther crashed into Reinhardt's face while his dagger sought to bury itself in the pit of Reinhardt's left arm. The nobleman managed to grab his attacker's wrist, slowing the deadly blade's strike. The blade pierced his skin, but did not sink into his heart. His huge opponent let a feral smile form on his face as he put more strength into the struggle. Slowly, by the slightest of measures, the dagger continued its lethal passage.

Suddenly the sound of thunder assailed Reinhardt's ears; a stench like rotten eggs filled his nose. One moment he had been staring into the triumphant face of his attacker. In the next instant the mercenary's head was a red ruin. The hand on the dagger slid away and the mercenary fell to the floor like a felled tree. Reinhardt saw one of the attackers run through the shattered doorway. The other lay with a gory wound on the side of his head at the feet of the only other man still standing in the room.

A plume of grey smoke rose from the barrel of the pistol Mathias Thulmann held in his right hand. The other pistol, its butt bloody from its impact against the mercenary's skull, was cocked and pointed at Reinhardt von Lichtberg's own head.

'It seems the last of these yapping curs has not seen fit to remain with us,' Thulmann said. Although he now held the upper hand, the witch hunter still possessed the same air of cold indifference.

'Go ahead and kill me, butcher,' Reinhardt swore, his heart afire with the injustice of it all. To come so close... 'You will be doing me a service,' he added.

'There are some things you should know before I decide if you should live or die,' the witch hunter sat down on the bed, motioning Reinhardt to a position from which the pistol could cover him more easily.

'Have you not wondered what brought me to your father's estate?' Mathias asked. He saw the slight look of interest surface amidst Reinhardt's mask of hate. 'I was summoned by Father Haeften.' Reinhardt started at the mention of the wizened old priest of Sigmar who led his father's household in their devotions. It was impossible for him to believe that the kindly soft-spoken old man could have been responsible for bringing about Mina's death. The witch hunter continued to speak.

'The father reported that one of his parish was touched by Chaos,' Thulmann paused, letting the distasteful word linger in the air. 'A young woman who was with child, whose own mother bespoke the irregularities that were manifesting beneath her skin.'

Stunned shock claimed Reinhardt. With child. His child.

'Upon my arrival, I examined the woman and discovered that her mother's fears had proven themselves,' Thulmann shook his head sadly. 'Her background was not of a suspicious nature, but the Darkness infects even the most virtuous. It was necessary to question her, to learn the source of her affliction. After several hours, she said your name.'

'Hours of torture!' Reinhardt spat, face twisted into an animal snarl. 'And then you took me so that your creature might "question" me!'

'Yes!' affirmed Thulmann, fire in his voice. 'As the father, the source of her corruption might lie within you, yourself! It was necessary to discover if there were others! Chaos is a contagion, where one is infected others soon fall ill!'

'Yet you released me,.' challenged Reinhardt, the shame he felt at his own survival further fuelling the impotent rage roaring through his veins.

'There was no corruption in you,' the witch hunter said, almost softly. 'Nor in the girl, not in her soul at least. It was days later that she confessed the crime that had been the cause of her corruption.' The witch hunter stared into Reinhardt's blazing eyes.

'Do you know a Doktor Weichs?' he asked.

'Freiherr Weichs?' Reinhardt answered. 'My father's physician?'

'Also physician to his household. Your Mina confided a most private problem with Weichs. She was worried that her condition would prevent you from leaving the von Lichtberg estate, from joining the Reiksguard and seeking the honour and glory that were your due. Weichs gave her a potion of his own creation which he assured her would dissolve the life within her womb as harmlessly as it had formed.'

Mathias Thulmann shook his head again. 'That devil's brew Weichs created was what destroyed your Mina, for it contained warpstone.' The witch hunter paused again, studying Reinhardt. 'I see that you are unfamiliar with the substance. It is the pure essence of Chaos, the black effluent of all the world's evil. In the days before Magnus the Pious, it was thought to possess healing properties, but only a fool or a madman would have anything to do with the stuff in this more enlightened age. Instead of destroying the life in the girl's belly, the warpstone changed it, corrupted woman and child. When I discovered this, I knew you were innocent and had you released.'

'And burned her!' Reinhardt swore. The witch hunter did not answer the youth but instead kicked the figure lying at his feet.

'There is life in you yet,' Thulmann snarled, looking back at Reinhardt to remind his prisoner that his pistol was yet trained on him. 'Account for yourself, pig! Who sends you to harm a dully-ordained servant of Sigmar?'

Mueller groaned as he rolled onto his side, staring at the witch hunter through a swollen eye. Carefully he put a hand to his split lip and wiped the trickle of blood from his mouth.

'Gerhart Knauf,' Mueller said between groans. 'It was Gerhart Knauf, the merchant. He was afraid you had come to Kleinsdorf seeking him.'

Mathias Thulmann let a grim smile part his lips. 'I am looking for him now,' he stated. The witch hunter smashed the heel of his boot into the grovelling mercenary's neck, crushing the man's windpipe. Mueller uttered a half-gargle, half-gasp and writhed on the floor as he desperately tried to breathe. Thulmann turned away from the dying wretch.

'This Knauf has reasons to see me dead,' Thulmann told Reinhardt, as though the noble had not heard the exchange between witch hunter and mercenary. 'Reasons which lie in the corruption of his mind and soul. If you would avenge your beloved, do so upon one deserving of your wrath, the same sort of filth that destroyed the girl long before I set foot in your father's house.'

Reinhardt glared at the witch hunter. 'I will kill you,' he said in a voice as cold as the grave. Mathias Thulmann sighed and removed a set of manacles from the belt lying on the bed.

'I cannot let you interfere with my holy duty,' the witch hunter said, pressing the barrel of the pistol against Reinhardt's temple. Thulmann closed one of the steel bracelets around the youth's wrist, locking it shut with a deft twist of an iron key. The other half of the manacles he closed around one of the bed posts, trapping the bracelet between the mattress and the wooden globe that topped the post.

'This should ensure that you do not interfere,' Mathias explained as he retrieved the rest of his weapons and stepped over the writhing Mueller.

'I will kill you, Mathias Thulmann,' Reinhardt repeated as the witch hunter left the room. As soon as the cloaked shape was gone, Reinhardt dropped to his knees and stretched his hand toward the ruined body of the mercenary who had almost killed him.

And the small hatchet attached to the man's belt.

GERHART KNAUF paced nervously across his bedchamber. It had been nearly an hour and still he had had no word from Mueller. Not for the first time, the merchant cast his eyes toward the small door at the top of the stairs. The tiny room within was the domain of Knauf's secret vice, the storehouse of all the forbidden and arcane knowledge Knauf had obtained over the years. The grimoire of a centuries-dead Bretonnian witch; the abhorred *Ninth Canticle of Tzeentch*, its mad author's name lost to the ages; a book of incantations designed to bring prosperity, or alternately, ruin by the infamous sorcerer Verlag Duhring. All the black secrets that had given Knauf his power made him better than the ignorant masses that surrounded him, who sneered at his eccentric ways. Before the black arts at his command, brutish men like Mueller were nothing; witch hunters were nothing.

Knauf took another drink from the bottle of wine he had removed from his cellar. The sound of someone pounding on the door of his villa caused the merchant to set his drink down. 'Finally,' he thought. But the figure that greeted Knauf when he gazed down from his window was not that of Mueller. Instead he saw the scarlet and black garbed form of the mercenary's victim. With a horrified gasp, Knauf withdrew from the window.

'He has come for me,' the merchant shuddered. Mueller and his men had failed and now there was no one to stand between Knauf and the determined witch hunter. Knauf shrieked as he heard a loud

explosion from below and the splintering of wood as the door was kicked open. He had only moments in which to save himself from the witch hunter's justice, to avoid the flames that were the price of the knowledge he had sought.

A smile appeared on Knauf's face. The merchant raced for the garret room. If there was no one who would save him from the witch hunter, there was something that might.

MATHIAS THULMANN paused on the threshold of the merchant's villa and holstered the smoking pistol in his hand. One shot from the flintlock weapon had been enough to smash the lock on the door, one kick enough to force open the heavy oak portal. The witch hunter drew his second pistol, the one he had reloaded after the melee at the inn and scanned the darkened foyer. No sign of life greeted Thulmann's gaze and he moved cautiously into the room, watching for the slightest movement in the darkness.

Suddenly the witch hunter's head snapped around, his eyes fixating upon the stairway leading from the foyer to the chambers above. He could sense the dark energies that were gathering somewhere in the rooms above him. Somewhere in this house, someone was calling upon the Ruinous Powers. Thulmann shifted the pistol to his off hand and drew the silvered blade of his sword, blessed by the Grand Theogonist himself, and grimly ascended the stairs.

GERHART KNAUF could feel the Geldritch energies gathering in the air around him as he read from the *Ninth Canticle of Tzeentch*. The power was almost a tangible quantity as it surged from the warlock and gathered at the centre of a ring of lighted candles. A nervous laugh interrupted the arcane litany streaming from Knauf's lips as he saw the first faint glimmer of light appear. Swiftly, the light grew in size, keeping pace with the increasing speed of the

words flying from Knauf's tongue. The crackling nimbus of light took on a pinkish hue and the first faint suggestion of a shape within the light was visible to him. No, the warlock realised, there was not a shape within the light; rather the light was assuming a shape. As the blasphemous litany continued, a broad torso coalesced from which two long, simian arms dangled each ending in an enormous clawed hand. Two short, thick legs slowly grew away from the torso until they touched the wooden floor. Finally, a head sprouted from between the two arms, growing away from the body so that the head was between its shoulders rather than above them. A gargoyle face appeared, its fanged mouth stretching across the head in a hideous grin. Two swirling pools of orange light burned from the gargoyle face and stared at the warlock who stood beside it.

The daemon uttered a loathsome sound like the wailing of an infant, a sound hideous in its suggestion of malevolent mirth. Knauf shuddered, and turned his eyes from the frightful thing he had summoned. In so doing his gaze fell upon his feet and the colour drained away from his face as the horror of what he had done became known to him.

The first thing Knauf had learned, the most important rule he had found repeated again and again in the arcane books he had so long hoarded, was that a sorcerer must always protect himself from that which he would have do his bidding. In his haste to save himself from the witch hunter, to summon this creature of Tzeentch, Knauf had forgotten to draw about himself a protective circle, a barrier that no daemon may cross.

Knauf's mind desperately groped amongst its store of arcane knowledge seeking some enchantment, some spell that would save the warlock from his hideous mistake. Before him, the daemon uttered its loathsome laugh again. Knauf screamed as the pink abomination moved towards him with a curious scuttling motion. Thoughts of sorcery forgotten, Knauf clenched his eyes and stretched his arm in front of his body, as though to ward away the monstrous horror even as the daemon advanced upon him. The

daemon's grotesque, out-sized hands closed about the warlock's extended arm, bringing new screams from Knauf as the daemon's icy touch seared through his veins. Slowly, the daemon raked a single claw down the length of the would-be wizard's arm, a deep wound that sank down to the very bone. Knauf's cries of agony rose still higher as the daemon's fingers probed the wound. Like a child with a piece of fruit, the horror began to peel the flesh from Knauf's arm, the warlock's howl of torment drowned out by the daemon's increasing glee.



MATHIAS THULMANN reached the garret in time to witness the warlock's demise. No longer amused by the high-pitched wails escaping from Knauf's throat, the pink hands released the skeleton limb they clutched and seized the warlock's shoulders, pulling Knauf's body to the daemon's own. The daemon's giant maw gaped wide and with a formless undulating motion surged up and over Knauf's head and shoulders. The pseudo-corporeal substance of the daemon allowed a horrified Thulmann to see the warlock's features behind the ichorous pink jaws that engulfed it. He could see those still-screaming features twist and mutate as the flesh was quickly dissolved, patches of muscle appearing beneath skin before being stripped away to reveal the bone itself. The hardened witch hunter turned away from the appalling sight.

The daemon's insane gibbering brought Thulmann back to his senses. The witch hunter returned his gaze to the loathsome creature and the fool who had called it from the Realm of Chaos. Atop Gerhart Knauf's body, a skull dripped the last of the warlock's blood and rivulets of meaty grease; the body beneath had been stripped to the breastbone. The whisper of a scream seemed to echo through the garret as the last shards of the warlock's soul fled into the night. The pink daemon rose from its gory repast and turned its fiery eyes upon the witch hunter.

Thulmann found himself powerless to act as the daemon slowly made its way across the garret room. The preternatural fiend moved in a capering, dance-like manner, its glowing body brilliant in the darkness, sounds of lunatic amusement emanating from its clenched, grinning jaws. The daemon stopped just out of reach of the witch hunter's sword, settling down on its haunches. It trained its fiery eyes on the scarlet-clad Templar, regarding him with an unholy mixture of hatred, humour, and hunger. Thulmann forced himself to meet that inhuman gaze, to stare into the swirling fires that burned from the pink face, forced himself to match his own faith and determination against the daemon's ageless malevolence. Thulmann could feel the orange light seeping into his mind, clouding his thoughts and numbing his will.

With an oath, the witch hunter tore his eyes from those of the daemon. The horror snarled, no longer amused by the novelty of the witch hunter's defiance.

The daemon launched itself at Thulmann, its mouth still wet with the warlock's blood. Thulmann dodged to his left, the quick action sparing him the brunt of the daemon's assault, but still resulting in the unearthly creature's claw scraping the witch hunter's ribs. Clenching his teeth against the painful wound and the daemon's icy touch, Thulmann lashed out at the daemon as it recovered from its charge.

A grip of frozen iron closed around the wrist of Thulmann's sword arm even as the heavy butt of the witch hunter's pistol crashed against the leering head of the horror. The daemon glared into Mathias's face and uttered a sinister laugh. Again, the witch hunter dealt the monster a blow that would have smashed the skull of any mortal creature. As Thulmann brought his arm back to strike again at the grinning daemon, his nightmarish foe swatted the weapon from his hand, sending the pistol hurtling down the stairway.

The daemon's gibbering laughter grew, leaning forward; its grinning jaws inches from Thulmann's hawk-like nose. The witch hunter pushed against the

daemon's frigid shape with his free hand, desperately trying to keep the ethereal jaws at bay, at the same time frenziedly trying to free his sword arm. Thulmann's efforts attracted the daemon's attention and, as if noticing the weapon for the first time, it reached across Thulmann's body to remove the sword from his grasp. Luminous pink claws closed around the steel blade.

An electric smell assaulted Thulmann's nostrils as the keening wail of the daemon ripped at his ears. As the horror's hand had closed about the witch hunter's blade, the daemon's glowing flesh had started to burn, luminous sparks crackling and dancing from the seared paw. The daemon released its grip on Thulmann and scuttled away from the witch hunter, a new look in its fiery eyes. A look Thulmann recognised even in so inhuman a being. *Fear.*

The daemon's left hand still gave off streams of purplish smoke, its very shape throbbing uncontrollably. The daemon looked at its injured paw then returned its attention to its adversary. The daemon could see the growing sense of hope, the first fledgling seed of triumph appearing in the very aura of the witch hunter. The sight incensed the daemon.

Thulmann slowly advanced upon the beast. The witch hunter had gained an advantage, he did not intend to lose it. But he did not reckon upon the creature's supernatural speed, or its feral rage. Before Thulmann had taken more than a few steps towards it, the daemon sprang from the floor as though it had been shot from a cannon. The monster crashed into Thulmann sending both man and fiend plummeting down the stairs.

Mathias Thulmann groggily tried to gain his feet, ears ringing from his violent descent. By some miracle he had managed to retain his sword. It was a fact that further infuriated his monstrous foe. The daemon scuttled toward the witch hunter. Thulmann struck at the daemon, but the attack was a clumsy one, easily dodged by the luminous being. The horror responded by striking him in the chest with a powerful upswing of both its arms.

The witch hunter was lifted off his feet, hurled backward by the tremendous force of the daemon's attack. Thulmann landed on the final flight of stairs, tumbling down them to lie broken and battered in the foyer.

At the foot of the stairs, the witch hunter struggled to rise, groping feebly for the sword that had landed beside him; watching as the giggling pink daemon capered down the stairs, dancing in hideous parody of the revellers of Kleinsdorf. Mathias summoned his last reserves of strength as the daemon descended toward him. With a prayer to Sigmar, the witch hunter struck as the daemon leaped.

A shriek like the tearing of metal rang out as Thulmann's sword sank into the daemon. The blade impaled the horror, its body writhing in agony before bursting apart like a bubble rising from a fetid marsh. A squeal of venomous rage rose from the daemon, shattering the glass the foyer's solitary window. Tiny sparks of bluish light flew from the point of the daemon's dissolution. Thulmann sank to his knees, thanking Sigmar for his deliverance.

Daemonic laughter broke into Thulmann's prayers. The taste of victory left the witch hunter as he saw the two daemons dance towards him from the darkness of the foyer. They were blue, goblin-sized parodies of the larger daemon Thulmann had vanquished, and they were glaring at him with looks of utter malevolence.

The foremost of the daemons opened its gigantic mouth, revealing the shark-like rows of serrated fangs. The blue horror laughed as it hopped and bounded across the foyer with frightening speed. Holding the sword before him, Thulmann prepared to meet the daemon's attack.

Thulmann cried out as a torrent of pain wracked his body. Swift as the first daemon's movements had been, the other had been swifter still, circling the witch hunter as he prepared to meet the first daemon's attack. Unseen, the blue horror struck at the witch hunter's leg, sinking its

fangs through the hard leather boot to worry the calf within. The intense pain made Thulmann drop his weapon, his only thought to seize the creature ravaging his leg.

The blue thing gave a hiccup of mock fright as Thulmann's hands closed around its scintillating form. The witch hunter tore the creature away from his boot and lifted the daemon over his head by its heels, thinking to dash its brains against the floor. In that instant he realised the trickery the beasts had employed. Scuttling across the floor, its over-sized hands dragging it by the hilt, was the other daemon. The monsters had taken away his only weapon.

The horror in Thulmann's hands twisted out of his grasp with a disgustingly boneless motion, raking its claws through his left hand as it fell to the floor. Giggling madly, the blue daemon danced away from the witch hunter's wrath, capering just beyond his reach until its companion returned from secreting his sword.

The two monsters circled Thulmann, striking at him from both sides at once, slashing his flesh with their claws before dancing away again. It was a slow, lingering death, like a pack of dogs tormenting a tethered horse because they do not know how to make a clean kill. Thulmann bled from dozens of wounds. Most were only superficial, but the pain caused by their infliction was intense. Every nerve in Thulmann's body now writhed at the slightest touch from one of the daemons.

Thulmann's eyes fell upon an object lying upon the floor, its metal barrel reflecting the unearthly bodies of his tormentors. The pistol their unholy parent had taken away from him. If it had not discharged or otherwise been fouled by its violent descent, perhaps the witch hunter could find escape from his agony. Trembling with pain, Thulmann reached for the gun.

One of the daemons slashed Thulmann's cheek as the mortal stooped to retrieve the weapon. Dancing away, the creature laughed and brayed. Its licked its

fanged maw and turned to rejoin its comrade in their amusement. It did not see the figure emerge from the darkness, nor the brilliant steel blade that reflected the light of its own glowing body.

The second monster sank its teeth into Thulmann's wrist. How dare the human think to spoil its fun? The blue fiend kicked the pistol away; turning to rake its claws through the shredded cloak that covered Thulmann's mangled back. The daemon leapt away in mid stroke, turning to the source of the sight and sound that had alarmed it. In the darkness, the sparks and spirals of luminous smoke rising from the death of the other blue horror were almost blinding. The beast scrambled toward the being it sensed lurking in the shadows, eager to rend the flesh of this new adversary who had vanquished its other half. A rusted wooden hatchet sailed out of the darkness, smashing into the snarling daemon.

'The sword,' gasped Thulmann, again reaching for his pistol. 'Use the sword.'

The remaining fiend rose swiftly, its fiery eyes blazing. The daemon lunged in the direction from which the attack had come. It was a fatal mistake. The small creature's hands closed upon the naked blade, sparking and sizzling just as its parent's had. As the blue horror recoiled from its unpleasant surprise, its attacker struck its head with a sweep of the blade, finishing the daemon in an explosion of sparks and shrieks. Unlike the pink monster, no new horrors were born from the deaths of its lesser offspring.

'You are mine to kill, Thulmann,' a cold voice from the shadows said. 'I'll not loose my vengeance to anyone else, be they man or daemon!' The witch hunter laughed weakly.

'You shall find your task much simpler now, avenger. My wounds prevent me from mounting any manner of capable defence.' A venomous note entered the witch hunter's voice. 'But you would prefer butchery to a fair duel. That is your idea of honour?'

Reinhardt glared at the witch hunter, tossing the witch hunter's sword to Thulmann. Thulmann shook his head as

he gingerly sheathed the weapon with his injured hand.

'I could not hold that blade with these,' Thulmann showed the enraged noble his bleeding palms and wrist, 'much less combat an able swordsman.'

Reinhardt glared at the witch hunter contemptuously. His gaze studied Thulmann before settling upon the holstered pistols on the witch hunter's belt.

'Are you fit enough to use one of those?' the youth snarled.

'Are you skilled enough to use one?' Mathias countered, slowly drawing one of the weapons and sliding it across the floor. Reinhardt stooped and retrieved the firearm.

'When you see hell, you will know,' the youth responded. He waited as the witch hunter lifted himself from the floor and slowly drew the remaining gun. As soon as he felt the witch hunter was ready, the youth's hand pointed at Thulmann and his finger depressed the pistol's trigger. There was a sharp click as the hammer fell upon an already expired cap.

'Never accept a weapon from an enemy,' Thulmann said his voice icy and emotionless. There was a loud explosion of noise as he fired the weapon he had retrieved from the base of the stairs and holstered while Reinhardt still fought the last daemon. Reinhardt was thrown to the floor as the bullet impacted against his shoulder. Thulmann limped toward the fallen noble. The witch hunter trained his eyes upon the man's wound.

'With a decent physician that will heal in a fortnight,' the witch hunter said, turning away from his victim. 'If we meet again, I may not be so restrained,' Thulmann added as he made his way from the house.

Reinhardt von Lichtberg's shout followed the witch hunter into the street.

'I will find you, Mathias Thulmann! If I have to track you to the nethermost pits of the Wastes, you will not escape me! I will find you again, and I will kill you!'

And the people of Kleinsdorf continued to dance and laugh and sing as they celebrated the triumph of light over Chaos. ●



PESTILENCE

By Dan Abnett

'The Archenemy infects this universe. If we do not pause to fight that infection here, within our own selves, what purpose is there in taking our fight to the stars?'

— Apothecary Engane,
from his *Treatise on Imperial Medicine*

I

IT IS MY belief that memory is the finest faculty we as a species own. Through the function of memory, we are able to gather, hone and transmit all manner of knowledge for the benefit of Mankind, and the endless glory of our God-Emperor, may the Golden Throne endure evermore!

To forget a mistake is to be defeated a second time, so we are taught in the Sermons of Thor. How may a great leader plan his campaign without memory of those battles won and lost before? How may his soldiers absorb his teaching and improve without that gift? How may the Ecclesiarchy disseminate its enervating message to the universal populace without that populace holding the teachings in memory? What are scholars, clerks, historians or chroniclers but agencies of memory?

And what is forgetfulness but the overthrow of memory, the ruination of precious knowledge, and an abhorrence?

I have, in the service of his exalted majesty the Emperor of Terra, waged war upon that abhorrence all my life. I strive to locate and recover things forgotten and return them to the custody of memory. I am a scabbler in dark places, an illuminator of shadows, a turner of long unturned pages, an asker of questions that have lapsed, forever hunting for answers that would otherwise have remained unvoiced. I am a recollector, prizing lost secrets from the taciturn universe and returning them to the safe fold of memory, where they might again improve our lot amongst the out-flung stars.

My particular discipline is that of *materia medica*, for human medicine was my original calling. Our understanding of our own vital mechanisms is vast and admirable, but we

can never know too much about our own biology and how to protect, repair and improve it. It is our burden as a species to exist in a galaxy riven by war, and where war goes, so flourish its hand-servants, injury and disease. It may be said that as each war front advances, so medical knowledge advances too. And where armies fall back in defeat or are destroyed, so medical knowledge retreats or is forgotten. Such are the lapses I seek to redress.

Upon that very purpose, I came to Symbal Iota late in my forty-eighth year, looking for Ebhoë. To provide context, let me say that this would be the third year of the Genovingian Campaign in the Obscura Segmentum, and about nine sidereal months after the first outbreak of Uhlren's Pox amongst the Guard legions stationed on Genovingia itself. Also known, colloquially, as blood-froth, Uhlren's Pox was named after the first victim it took, a colour-sergeant called Gustaf Uhlren, of the Fifteenth Mordian, if memory serves me. And I pride myself it does.

As a student of Imperial history, and *materia medica* too, you will have Uhlren's Pox in your memory. A canker of body and vitality, virulently contagious, it corrupts from within, thickening circulatory fluids and wasting marrow, while embellishing the victim's skin with foul cysts and buboes. The cycle between infection and death is at most four days. In the later stages, organs rupture, blood emulsifies and bubbles through the pores of the skin, and the victim becomes violently delusional. Some have even conjectured that by this phase, the soul itself has been corroded away. Death is inescapable in almost every case.

It appeared without warning on Genovingia, and within a month, the *Medicæ Regimentalis* were recording twenty death notices a day. No drug or procedure could be found that began to even slow its effects. No origin for the infection could be located. Worst of all, despite increasingly vigorous programs of quarantine and cleansing, no method could be found to prevent wholesale contagion. No

plague carriers, or means of transmission, were identifiable.

As an individual man weakens and sickens, so the Imperial Guard forces as a whole began to fail and falter as their best were taken by the pestilence. Within two months, Warmaster Rhyngold's staff were doubting the continued viability of the entire campaign. By the third month, Uhlen's Pox had also broken out (apparently miraculously and spontaneously, given its unknown process of dispersal) on Genovingia Minor, Lorches and Adamanaxer Delta. Four separate centres of infection, right along the leading edge of the Imperial advance through the sector. At that point, the contagion had spread to the civilian population of Genovingia itself, and the Administratum had issued a proclamation of pandemic. It was said the skies above the cities of that mighty world were black with carrion flies and the stench of biological pollution permeated every last acre of the planet.

I had a bureaucratic posting on Lorches at that time, and became part of the emergency body charged with researching a solution. It was weary work. I personally spent over a week in the Archive without seeing daylight as I oversaw the systematic interrogation of that vast, dusty body of knowledge.

It was my friend and colleague Administrator Medica Lenid Vammel who first called our attention to Pirody and the Torment. It was an admirable piece of work on his part, a feat of study, cross-reference and memory. Vammel always had a good memory.

Under the instruction of Senior Administrator Medica Junas Malter, we diverted over sixty per cent of our staff to further research into the records of Pirody, and requests were sent out to other Genovingian worlds to look to their own archives. Vammel and I compiled the accumulated data ourselves, increasingly certain we had shone a light into the right shadow and found a useful truth.

Surviving records of the Torment incident on Pirody were painfully thin, though consistent. It was, after all, thirty-four years in the past. Survivors had been few, but we were able to trace one hundred and ninety-one possibles who might yet be alive. They were scattered to the four cosmic winds.

Reviewing our findings, Senior Malter authorised personal recollection, such was the gravity of the situation, and forty of us, all with rank higher administrator or better, were dispatched immediately. Vammel, rest his soul, was sent to Gandian Saturnalia, and was caught up in a local civil war and thereafter killed. I do not know if he ever found the man that he was looking for. Memory is unkind there.

And me, I was sent to Symbal Iota.

II

SYMBAL IOTA, where it is not covered in oceans that are the most profound mauve in colour – a consequence, so I understand, of algae growth – is a hot, verdant place. Belts of rainforest islands ring the equatorial region in a wide belt.

I made planetfall at Symbalopolis, a flat-topped volcanic outcrop around whose slopes hive structures cluster like barnacles, and there transferred to a trimaran which conveyed me, over a period of five days, down the length of the local island group to Saint Bastian. I cursed the slowness of the craft – though in truth it skated across the mauve seas at better than thirty knots – and on several occasions tried to procure an ornithopter or air conveyance. But the Symbali are a nautical breed who place no faith in air travel. It was tortuous and I was impatient. It had taken ten days to cross the Empyrean from Lorches to Symbal Iota aboard a navy frigate. Now it took half that time again to cross a distance infinitesimally smaller.

It was hot, and I spent my time below decks, reading data-slates. The sun and sea-wind of Symbal burned my skin, used as it was to years of lamp-lit libraries. I took to wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat above my administratus robes whenever I ventured out on deck, a detail my servitor Kalibane found relentlessly humorous.

On the fifth morning, Saint Bastian rose before us out of the violet waters, a pyramidal tower volcanic flue dressed in jungle greenery. Even as we crossed the inlet from the trimaran to the shore by electric launch, turquoise seabirds mobbing over our heads, I could see no discernible sign of habitation. The thick coat of the forest came right down to the shore itself, revealing only a thin line of white beach at its hem.

The launch pulled into a cove where an ancient stone jetty jutted out from under the trees like an unfinished bridge. Kalibane, his bionic limbs whirring, carried my luggage onto the jetty and then helped me over. I stood there, sweating in my robes, leaning against my staff of office, batting away the beetles that circled in the stifling humidity of the cove.

There was no one there to greet me, though I had voxed word of my approach ahead several times en route. I glanced back at the launch pilot, a dour Symbali, but he seemed not to know anything. Kalibane shambled down to the shore-end of the jetty, and called my attention to a copper bell, verdigrised by time and the oceans, that hung from a hook on the end pier.

'Ring it,' I told him, and he did, cautiously, rapping his simian fingers against the metal dome. Then he glanced back at me, nervously, his optical implants clicking under his low brow-ridge as they refocused.

Two sisters of the Ecclesiarch appeared shortly, their pure white robes as stiff and starched as the bicorn wimples they wore on their heads. They seemed to regard me with some amusement, and wordlessly ushered me to follow them. I fell in step behind them and Kalibane followed, carrying the luggage.

We took a dirt path up through the jungle which rose sharply and eventually became stepped. Spears of sunlight flickered through the canopy above and the steaming air was full of exotic bird-song and the fidget of insects.

At a turn in the path, the Hospice of Saint Bastian Apostate suddenly stood before me. A great, stone-built edifice typical of the Early Imperial Naive, its ancient flying buttresses and lower walls were clogged with vines and creepers. I could discern a main building of five storeys, an adjacent chapel, which looked the oldest part of the place, as well as outbuildings, kitchens and a walled garden. Above the wrought iron lych-gate stood a weathered statue of our beloved God-Emperor smiting the Archenemy. Inside the rusty gate, a well-tended path led through a trimmed lawn punctured by tomb-stones and crypts. Stone angels and graven images of the Adeptes Astartes regarded me as I followed the sisters to the main door of the hospice.

I noticed then, fleetingly, that the windows of the two uppermost storeys were rigidly barred with iron grills.

I left Kalibane outside with my possessions and entered the door behind the sisters. The main atrium of the Hospice was a dark and deliciously cool oasis of marble, with limestone pillars that rose up into the dim spaces of the high vault. My eyes lighted on the most marvellous triptych at the altar end, beneath a stained glass oriole window, which I made observance to at once. In breadth, it was wider than a man's spread arms, and showed three aspects of the Saint. On the left, he roamed the wilderness, in apostasy, renouncing the daemons of the air and fire; on the right, he performed the Miracle of the Maimed Souls. In the centre panel, his martyred body, draped in blue cloth, the nine bolter wounds clearly countable on his pallid flesh, lay in the arms of a luminous and suitably mournful Emperor.

I looked up from my devotions to find the sisters gone. I could feel the subliminal chorus of a psychic choir mind-singing nearby. The cool air pulsed.

A figure stood behind me. Tall, sculptural, his starched robes as white as his smooth skin was black; he seemed to regard me with the same amusement that the sisters had shown.

I realised I was still wearing my straw hat. I removed it quickly, dropping it onto a pew, and took out the pict-slate of introduction Senior Malter had given me before I left Lorches.

'I am Baptrice,' he said, his voice low and genial. 'Welcome to the Saint's Hospice.'

'Higher Administrator Medica Lemual Sark,' I replied. 'My dedicated function is as a recollector, posted lately to Lorches, Genovingia general group 4577 decimal, as part of the Campaign Auxiliary Clerical Archive.'

'Welcome, Lemual,' he said. 'A recollector. Indeed. We've not had one of your breed here before.'

I was uncertain quite what he meant, though in hindsight, the detail of his misunderstanding still chills me. I said 'You were expecting me? I voxed messages ahead.'

'We have no vox-caster here at the hospice,' Baptrice replied. 'What is outside does not concern us. Our work is focussed on what is inside... inside this building, inside

ourselves. But do not be alarmed. You are not intruding. We welcome all who come here. We do not need notice of arrival.'

I smiled politely at this enigmatic response and tapped my fingers on my staff. I had hoped they would be ready for me, and have everything in place so that I could begin my work immediately. Once again, the leisurely pace of Symbal Iota was weighing me down.

'I must, Brother Baptrice, proceed with all haste. I wish to begin my efforts at once.'

He nodded. 'Of course. Almost all who come to Saint Bastian are eager to begin. Let me take you through and provide you with food and a place to bathe.'

'I would rather just see Ebhoe. As soon as it is possible.'

He paused, as if mystified.

'Ebhoe?'

'Colonel Fege Ebhoe, late of the Twenty-Third Lammark Lancers. Please tell me he is still here! That he is still alive!'

'He... is.' Baptrice faltered, and looked over my pict-slate properly for the first time. Some sort of realisation crossed his noble face.

'My apologies, Higher Sark. I misconstrued your purpose. I see now that you are an acting recollector, sent here on official business.'

'Of course!' I snapped. 'What else would I be?'

'A supplicant, coming here to find solace. An inmate. Those that arrive on the jetty and sound the bell are always that. We get no other visitors except those who come to us for help.'

'An... inmate?' I repeated.

'Don't you know where you are?' he asked. 'This is the Hospice of Saint Bastian, a refuge for the insane.'

III

AN ASYLUM! Here was an inauspicious start to my mission! I had understood, from my research, that the Hospice of Saint Bastian was home to a holy order who offered sanctuary and comfort for those brave warriors of the Emperor's legions who were too gravely wounded or disabled by war to continue in service. I knew the place took in the damaged and the lost from warzones all across the sector, but I truly had no notion that the damage they specialised in was

wounds to the psyche and sanity! It was a hospice for the deranged, individuals who presented themselves at its gates voluntarily in hope of redemption.

And worst of all, Baptrice and the sisters had presumed me to be a supplicant! That damned straw hat had given me just the air of madness they were expecting! I was lucky not to have been unceremoniously strapped into a harness and placed in isolation.

On reflection, I realised I should have known. Bastian, that hallowed saint, was a madman who had found sanity in the love of the Emperor, and who later cured, through miracles, the mentally infirm.

Baptrice pulled a bell cord, and novitiates appeared. Kalibane was escorted inside with my luggage. We were left alone in the atrium as Baptrice went to make preparations. As we waited, a grizzled man with an old tangle of scar tissue where his left arm had been crossed the hall. He was naked save for a weathered, empty ammunition belt strung around his torso. He looked at us dimly, his head nodding slightly, then he padded on his way and was lost from view.

Somewhere, distantly, I could hear sobbing, and an urgent voice repeating something over and over again. Hunched down at my side, his knuckles resting on the flagstones, Kalbane glanced up at me anxiously and I put a reassuring hand on his broad, hairy shoulder.

Figures appeared around us: haggard, tonsured men in long black Ecclesiarch vestments and more phantom sisters in their ice-white robes and horned cowls. They grouped in the shadows on either side of the atrium and watched us silently. One of the men rehearsed silently from long ribbons of parchment that a boy-child played out for him from a studded casket. Another scribbled in a little chapbook with his quill. Another swung a brass censor around his feet, filling the air with dry, pungent incense.

Baptrice reappeared. 'Brethren, bid welcome to Higher Administrator Sark, who has come to us on official business. You will show him every courtesy and co-operation.'

'What official business?' asked the old priest with the chapbook, looking up with gimlet eyes. Magnifying half-moon lenses were built into his nasal bone, and rosary beads hung around his dewlapped neck like a floral victory wreath.

'A matter of recollection,' I replied.

'Pertaining to what?' he pressed.

'Brother Jardone is our archivist, Higher Sark. You will forgive his persistence.' I nodded to Baptrice and smiled at the elderly Jardone, though no smile was returned.

'I see we are kindred, Brother Jardone. Both of us devote ourselves to remembrance.'

He half shrugged.

'I am here to interview one of your... inmates. It may be that he holds within some facts that even now may save the lives of millions in the Genovingian Group.'

Jardone closed his book and gazed at me, as if waiting for more. Senior Malter had charged me to say as little as I could of the pandemic, for news of such a calamity may spread unrest. But I felt I had to give them more.

'Warmaster Rhyngold is commanding a major military excursion through the Genovingian Group. A sickness, which has been named Uhlren's Pox, is afflicting his garrisons. Study has shown it may bear comparison with a plague known as the Torment, which wasted Pirody some three decades past. One survivor of that epidemic resides here. If he can furnish me with any details of the incident, it may be productive in securing a cure.'

'How bad is it, back on Genovingia?' asked another old priest, the one with the censor.

'It is... contained,' I lied.

Jardone snorted. 'Of course it is contained. That is why a higher administrator has come all this way. You ask the most foolish things, Brother Giraud.'

Another man now spoke. He was older than all, crooked and half-blind, his wrinkled pate dotted with liver spots. A flared ear trumpet clung to the robes of his left shoulder with delicate mechanical legs. 'I am concerned that questioning and a change to routine may disturb the serenity of the hospice. I do not want our residents upset in any way.'

'Your comment is noted, Brother Niro,' said Baptrice. 'I'm sure Higher Sark will be discreet.'

'Of course,' I assured them.



IT WAS LATE afternoon when Baptrice finally led me upstairs into the heart of the hospice. Kalibane followed us, lugging a few boxed items from my luggage. Ghostly, bicorned sisters watched us from every arch and shadow.

We proceeded from the stairs into a large chamber on the third floor. The air was close. Dozens of inmates lurked here, though none glanced at us. Some were clad in dingy, loose-fitting overalls, while others still wore ancient fatigues and Imperial Guard dress. All rank pins, insignia and patches had been removed, and no one had belts or bootlaces. Two were intently playing Regicide on an old tin board by the window. Another sat on the bare floor planks, rolling dice. Others mumbled to themselves or gazed into the distance blankly. The naked man we had seen in the atrium was crouched in a corner, loading spent shellcases into his ammunition belt. Many of the residents had old warwounds and scars, unsightly and grotesque.

'Are they... safe?' I whispered to Baptrice.

'We allow the most stable freedom to move and use this common area. Of course, their medication is carefully monitored. But all who come here are "safe", as all who come here come voluntarily. Some, of course, come here to escape the episodes that have made regular life impractical.'

None of this reassured me.

On the far side of the chamber, we entered a long corridor flanked by cell rooms. Some doors were shut, bolted from the outside. Many had cage-bars locked over them. All had sliding spy-slits. There was a smell of disinfectant and ordure. Someone, or something, was knocking quietly and repeatedly against one locked door we passed. From another we heard singing.

Some doors were open. I saw two novitiates sponge-bathing an ancient man who was strapped to his metal cot with fabric restraints. The old man was weeping piteously. In another room, where the door was open but the outer cage locked in place, we saw a large, heavily muscled man sitting in a ladderback chair, gazing out through the bars. He was covered in tattoos: regimental emblems, mottoes, kill-scores. His eyes glowed with the most maniacal light. He had the tusks of some feral animal implanted in his lower jaw, so they hooked up over his upper lip.

As we passed, he leaped up and tried to reach through the bars at us. His powerful arm flexed and clenched. He issued a soft growl.

'Behave, Ioq!' Baptrice told him.

The cell next door to Ioq's was our destination. The door was open, and a sister and a novitiate waited for us. The room beyond them was pitch black.

Baptrice spoke for a moment with the novitiate and the sister. He turned to me. 'Ebhoë is reluctant, but the sister has convinced him it is right that he speaks with you. But you may not go in. Please sit at the door.'

The novitiate brought up a stool, and I sat in the doorway, throwing out my robes over my knees. Kalibane dutifully opened my boxes and set up the transcribing artificer on its tripod stand. I gazed into the blackness of the room, trying to make out shapes. I could see nothing.

'Why is it dark in there?'

'Ebhoë's malady, his mental condition, is exacerbated by light. He demands darkness.' Baptrice shrugged.

I nodded glumly and cleared my throat. 'By the grace of the God Emperor of Terra, I come here on his holy work. I identify myself as Lemual Sark, higher administrator medica, assigned to Lorches administratum.'

I glanced over at the artificer. It chattered quietly and extruded the start of a parchment transcription tape that I hoped would soon be long and informative.

'I seek Fege Ebhoë, once a colonel with the Twenty-Third Lammark Lancers.'

Silence.

'Colonel Ebhoë?'

A voice, thin as a knife, cold as a corpse, whispered out of the dark room. 'I am he. What is your business?'

I leaned forward. 'I wish to discuss Pirody with you. The Torment you endured.'

'I have nothing to say. I won't remember anything.'

'Come now, colonel. I'm sure you will if you try.'

'You misunderstand. I didn't say I "can't." I said I won't.'

'Deliberately?'

'Just so. I refuse to.'

I wiped my mouth, and realised I was dry-tongued. 'Why not, colonel?'

'Pirody is why I'm here. Thirty-four years, trying to forget. I don't want to start remembering now.'

Baptrice looked at me with a slight helpless gesture. He seemed to be suggesting that it was done, and I should give up.

'Men are dying on Genovingia from a plague we know as Uhlren's Pox. This pestilence bears all the hallmarks of the Torment. Anything you can tell me may help save lives.'

'I couldn't then. Sixty thousand men died on Pirody. I couldn't save them though I tried with every shred of my being. Why should that be different now?'

I gazed at the invisible source of the cold voice. 'I cannot say for sure. But I believe it is worth trying.'

There was a long pause. The artificer whirled on idle. Kalibane coughed, and the machine recorded the sound with a little chatter of keys.

'How many men?'

'I'm sorry, colonel? What did you ask me?'

'How many men are dying?'

I took a deep breath. 'When I left Lorches, nine hundred were dead and another fifteen hundred infected. On Genovingia Minor, six thousand and twice that number ailing. On Adamanaxer Delta, two hundred, but it had barely begun there. On Genovingia itself... two and a half million.'

I heard Baptrice gasp in shock. I trusted he would keep this to himself.

'Colonel?'

Nothing.

'Colonel, please--'

Cold and cutting, the voice came again, sharper than before. 'Pirody was a wasted place...'

IV

'P IRODY WAS A wasted place. We didn't want to go there. But the

Archenemy had taken the eastern continent and razed the hives, and the northern cities were imperiled. Warmaster Getus sent us in. Forty thousand Lammark Lancers, virtually the full strength of the Lammark regiments. Twenty thousand Fancho armour men and their machines. And a full company of Astartes, the Doom Eagles, shining grey and red.

'The place we were at was Pirody Polar. It was Emperor knows how old. Cyclopean towers and columns of green marble, hewn in antique times by hands I'm not convinced were human. There was a strangeness to the geometry there, the angles never seemed quite right.

'It was as cold as a bastard. We had winter dress, thick white flak coats with fur hoods, but the ice got in the las-guns and dulled their charges and the damned Fanchos tanks were forever refusing to start. It was day, too. Day all the time. There was no night, it was the wrong season. We were so far north. The darkest it got was dusk, when one of the two suns set briefly and the sky went flesh pink. Then it would be daylight again.

'We'd been fighting on and off for two months. Mainly long range artillery duels, pounding the ice-drifts. No one could sleep because of the perpetual daylight. I know two men, one a Lammarkine, I'm not proud to say, who gouged out his eyes. The other was a Fanchos.

'Then they came. Black dots on the ice-floes, thousands of them, waving banners so obscene, they...

'Whatever. We were in no mood to fight. Driven mad by the light, driven to distraction by the lack of sleep, unnerved by the curious geometry of the place we were defending, we were easy meat. The forces of Chaos slaughtered us, and pushed us back into the city itself. The civilians, about two million strong, were worse than useless. They were pallid, idle things, with no drive or appetite. When doom came upon them, they simply gave up.

'We were besieged for five months, despite six attempts by the Doom Eagles to break the deadlock. Faith, but they were terrifying! Giants, clashing their bolters together before each fight, screaming at the foe, killing fifty for every one we picked off.

'But it was like fighting the tide, and for all their power, there were only sixty of them.

'We called for reinforcements. Getus had promised us, but now he was long gone aboard his warship, drawn back behind the fleet picket in case things got nasty.

'The first man I saw fall to the Torment was a captain in my seventh platoon. He just collapsed one day, feverish. We took him to the Pirody Polar infirmary, where Subjunctus Valis, the apothecary of the

Doom Eagles company, was running the show.

'An hour later, the captain was dead. His skin had blistered and bubbled. His eyes had burst. He had tried to kill Valis with a piece of the metal cot he had torn from the wall brace. Then he bled out.

'You know what that means? His entire body spewed blood from every orifice, every pore. He was a husk by the time it was over.

In the day after the captain's death, sixty fell victim. Another day, two hundred. Another day, a thousand. Most died within two hours. Others lingered... for days, pustular, agonised.

'Men I had known all my life turned into gristly sacks of bone before my eyes. Damn you, Sark, for making me remember this!

'On the seventh day it spread to the Fanchos as well. On the ninth, it reached the civilian population. Valis ordered all measure of quarantine, but it was no good. He worked all hours of the endless day, trying to find a vaccine, trying to alleviate the relentless infection.

'On the tenth day, a Doom Eagle fell victim. In his Torment, blood gouting from his visor grills, he slew two of his comrades and nineteen of my men. The disease had overcome even the Astartes purity seals.

'I went to Valis, craving good news. He had set up a laboratory in the infirmary, where blood samples and tissue-scrapes boiled in alembics and separated in oil flasks. He assured me the Torment would be stopped. He explained how unlikely it was for a pestilence to be transmitted in such a cold clime, where there is no heat to incubate and spread decay. And he also believed it would not flourish in light. So he had every stretch of the city wired with lamps so that there would be no darkness.

'No darkness. In a place where none came naturally, even the shadows of closed rooms were banished. Everything was bright. You can see now why I abhor the light and cling to darkness.

'The stench of blood-filth was appalling. Valis did his work, but still we fell. By the twenty-first day, I'd lost thirty-seven per cent of my force. The Fanchos were all but gone. Twelve thousand Pirodian citizens were dead or dying. Nineteen Doom Eagles had succumbed.

'Here are your facts if you want them. The plague persisted in a climate that should have killed it. It showed no common process of transmission. It brooked no attempt to contain or control it, despite efforts to enforce quarantine and cleanse infected areas with flamers. It was ferociously contagious. Even Marine purity seals were no protection. Its victims died in agony.

'Then one of the Doom Eagles deciphered the obscene script of one of the chaos banners displayed outside the walls.

'It said...

'It said one word. One filthy word. One damned, abominable word that I have spent my life trying to forget.

V

ICRANED IN at the dark doorway. 'What word? What word was it, Colonel?' With great reluctance, he spoke it. It wasn't a word at all. It was an obscene gurggle dignified by consonants. The glyph-name of the plague-daemon itself, one of the ninety-seven Blasphemies That May Not Be Written Down.

At its utterance, I fell back off my stool, nausea writhing in my belly and throat. Kalibane shrieked. The sister collapsed in a faint and the Novitiate fled. Baptrice took four steps back from the doorway, turned, and vomited spectacularly.

The temperature in the corridor dropped by fifteen degrees.

Unsteady, I attempted to straighten my overturned stool and pick up the artificer that the novitiate had knocked over. Where it had recorded the word, I saw, the machine's parchment tape had begun to smoulder.

Screaming and wailing echoed down the hall from various cells.

And then, Ioq was out.

Just next door, he had heard it all, his scarred head pressed to the cage. Now that cage splintered off its mount and crashed to the corridor floor. Berserk, the huge ex-guardsman thrashed out and turned towards us.

He was going to kill me, I'm certain, but I was slumped and my legs wouldn't work. Then Kalibane, bless his brave heart, flew at him. My devoted servitor rose up on his stunted hind limbs, the bionics augmenting his vast forelimbs throwing them up in a

warning display. From splayed foot to reaching hand, Kalibane was eleven feet tall. He peeled back his lips and screeched through bared steel canines.

Froth dribbling from his tusked mouth, Ioq smashed Kalibane aside. My servitor made a considerable dent in the wall.

Ioq was on me.

I swept my staff of office around and thumbed the recessed switch below the head.

Electric crackles blasted from the staff's tip. Ioq convulsed and fell. Twitching, he lay on the floorboards, and evacuated involuntarily. Baptrice was on his feet now. Alarms were ringing and novitiates were rushing frantically into the corridor with harness jackets and clench poles.

I rose and looked back at the dark doorway.

'Colonel Ebhoe?'

The door slammed shut.

VI

THERE WOULD be no further interview that afternoon, Brother Baptrice made plain, despite my protests. Novitiates escorted me to a guest chamber on the second floor. It was whitewashed and plain, with a hard, wooden bed and small scriptorium table. A leaded window looked out onto the graveyard and the jungles beyond.

I felt a great perturbation of spirit, and paced the room as Kalibane unpacked my belongings. I had come so close, and had begun to draw the reluctant Ebhoe out. Now to be denied the chance to continue when the truly dark secrets were being revealed!

I paused by the window. The glaring, crimson sun was sinking into the mauve oceans, throwing the thick jungles into black, wild relief. Seabirds reeled over the bay in the dying light. Stars were coming out in the dark blue edges of the sky.

Calmer now, I reflected that whatever my internal uproar, the uproar in the place itself was greater.

From the window, I could hear all manner of screams, wails, shouts, banging doors, thundering footsteps, rattled keys. The word of blasphemy that Ebhoe had spoken had thrown all the fragile minds in this house of

insanity into disarray, like red-hot metal plunged into quenching cold water. Great efforts were being made to quieten the inmates.

I sat at the teak scriptorium for a while, reviewing the transcripts while Kalibane dozed on a settle by the door. Ebhoe had made particular mention of Subjunctus Valis, the Doom Eagles' apothecary. I looked over copies of the old Pirody debriefings I had brought with me, but Valis's name only appeared in the muster listings. Had he survived? Only a direct request to the Doom Eagles chapter house could provide an answer, and that might take months. The Astartes are notoriously secretive, sometimes downright blatant, in their unco-operative relationship with the Administratum. At best, it might involve a series of formal approaches, delaying tactics, bargaining.

Even so, I wanted to alert my brethren on Lorches to the possible lead. I damned Saint Bastian when I remembered the place had no vox-caster! I couldn't even forward a message to the astropathic enclave at Symbalopolis for transmission off-world.

A sister brought me supper on a tray. Just as I was finishing, and Kalibane was lighting the lamps, Niro and Jardone came to my chamber.

'Brothers?'

Jardone got right to it, staring at me through his half-moon lenses. 'The brotherhood of the hospice have met, and it decided that you must leave. Tomorrow. No further audiences will be granted. We have a vessel that will take you to the fishing port at Math Island.* You can obtain passage to Symbalopolis from there.'

'I am disappointed, Jardone. I do not wish to leave. My recollection is not complete.'

'It is as complete as it's going to be!' he snapped.

'The hospice has never been so troubled,' Niro said quietly. 'There have been brawls. Two novitiates have been injured. Three inmates have attempted suicide. Years of work have been undone in a few moments.'

I nodded. 'I regret the disturbance, but—'

'No buts!' barked Jardone.

'I'm sorry, Higher Sark,' said Niro. 'That is how it is.'



ISLEPT BADLY in the cramped cot. My mind, my memory, played games, going over the details of the interview. There was shock and injury in Ebhoe, that was certain, for the event had been traumatic. But there was something else. A secret beyond anything he had told me, some profound memory. I could taste it.

I would not be deterred. Too many lives depended on it.

Kalibane was slumbering heavily when I crept from the chamber. In the darkness, I felt my way to the stairs, and up to the third floor. There was a restlessness in the close air. I moved past locked cells where men moaned in their sleep or muttered in their insomnia.

At intervals, I hugged shadows as novitiate wardens with lamps made their patrols. It took perhaps three-quarters of an hour to reach the cellblock where Ebhoe resided. I stalked nervously past the bolted door of Ioq's room.

The spy-slit opened at my touch. 'Ebhoe? Colonel Ebhoe?' I called softly into the darkness.

'Who?' his cold voice replied.

'It is Sark. We weren't finished.'

'Go away.'

'I will not, until you tell me the rest.'

'Go away.'

I thought desperately, and eagerness made me cruel. 'I have a torch, Ebhoe. A powerful lamp. Do you want me to shine it in through the spy-hole?'

When he spoke again, there was terror in his voice. Emperor forgive me for my manipulation.

'What more is there?' he asked. 'The Torment spread. We died by the thousand. I cannot help with your cause, though I pity those men on Genovingia.'

'You never told me how it ended.'

'Did you not read the reports?'

I glanced up and down the dark cellblock to make sure we were still alone. 'I read them. They were... sparse. They said Warmaster Gatus incinerated the enemy from orbit, and ships were sent to relieve you at Pirody Polar. They expressed horror at the extent of the plague-loss. Fifty-nine thousand men dead. No count was made of the civilian losses. They said that by the time the relief ships arrived, the Torment had been expunged. Four hundred men were

evacuated. Of them, only one hundred and ninety-one are still alive according to the records.'

'There's your answer then.'

'No, colonel. That's no answer! How was it expunged?'

'We located the source of infection, cleansed it. That was how.'

'How, Ebhoe? How, in the God-Emperor's name?'

'It was the height of the Torment. Thousands dead...'

VII

IT WAS THE height of the Torment. Thousands dead, corpses everywhere, pus and blood running in those damnably bright halls. I went to Valis again, begging for news. He was in his infirmium, working still. Another batch of vaccines to try, he told me. The last six had failed, and had seemed to aggravate the contagion.

The men were fighting themselves by then, killing each other in fear and loathing. I told Valis this, and he was silent, working at a flame burner on the steel workbench. He was huge being, of course... Astartes, a head and a half taller than me, wearing a cowled red robe over his Doom Eagle armour. He lifted specimen bottles from his narthecium, and held them up to the ever-present light.

'I was tired, tired like you wouldn't believe. I hadn't slept in days. I put down the flamer I had been using for cleansing work, and sat on a stool.

"Are we all going to perish?" I asked the great apothecary.

"Dear, valiant Ebhoe," he said with a laugh. "You poor little man. Of course not. I will not allow it."

He turned to face me, filling a long syringe from a stoppered bottle. I was in awe of him, even after the time we had spent together.

"You are one of the lucky ones, Ebhoe. Clean so far. I'd hate to see you contract this pestilence. You have been a faithful ally to me through this dark time, helping to distribute my vaccines. I will mention you to your commanders."

"Thank you, apothecary."

"Ebhoe," he said, "I think it is fair to say we cannot save any who have been infected now. We can only hope to vaccinate the

healthy against infection. I have prepared a serum for that purpose, and I will inoculate all healthy men with it. You will help me. And you will be first. So I can be sure not to lose you."

I hesitated. He came forward with the syringe, and I started to pull up my sleeve.

"Open your jacket and tunic. It must go through the stomach wall."

I reached for my tunic clasps.

And saw it. The tiniest thing. Just a tiny, tiny thing.

A greenish-yellow blister just below Valis's right ear.'

VIII

EBHOE FELL SILENT. The air seemed electrically charged. Inmates in neighbouring cells were thrashing restless, and some were crying out. At any moment, the novitiate wardens would come.

'Ebhoe?' I called through the slit.

His voice had fallen to a terrified whisper, the whisper of a man who simply cannot bear to put the things haunting his mind into words.

'Ebhoe?'

Keys clattered nearby. Lamplight flickered under a hall door. Ioq was banging at his cell door and growling. Someone was crying, someone else was wailing in a made-up language. The air was ripe with the smell of faeces, sweat and agitated fear.

'Ebhoe!'

There was no time left.

'Ebhoe, please!'

'Valis had the Torment! He'd had it all along, right from the start!' Ebhoe's voice was strident and anguished. The words came out of the slit as hard and lethal as las-fire. 'He had spread it! He! Through his work, his vaccines, his treatments! He had spread the plague! His mind had been corrupted by it; he didn't know what he was doing! His many, many vaccines had failed because they weren't vaccines! They were new strains of the Torment bred in his infirmium! He was the carrier, a malevolent, hungry pestilence clothed in the form of a noble man, killing thousands upon thousands upon thousands!'

I went cold. Colder than I'd ever been before. The idea was monstrous. The Torment had been more than a waster of lives, it had been sentient, alive, deliberate... planning and moving through the instrument it had corrupted.

The door of loq's cell was bulging and shattering. Screams welled all around, panic and fear in equal measure. The entire hospice was shaking with unleashed psychoses.

Lamps flashed at the end of the block. Novitiates yelled out and ran forward as they saw me. They would have reached me had loq not broken out, rabid and slaving, throwing his hideous bulk into them, ripping at them in a frenzy.

'Ebhoel' I yelled through the slit. 'What did you do?'

He was crying, his voice ragged with gut-heaving sobs. 'I grabbed my flamer! Emperor have mercy, I snatched it up and bathed Valis with the flame! I killed him! I killed him! I slew the pride of the Doom Eagles! I burned him apart! I expunged the source of the Torment!'

A novitiate flew past me, his throat ripped out by animal tusks. His colleagues were locked in desperate struggle with loq.

'You burned him.'

'Yes. The flames touched off the chemicals in the infirmium, the sample bottles, the flasks of seething plague water. They exploded. A fireball... oh Emperor... brighter than the daylight that had never gone away. brighter than... than... fire everywhere... I liquid fire... flames around me... all around... oh... oh...'

Bright flashes filled the hall, the loud discharge of a las-weapon.

I stepped back from Ebhoel's cell door, shaking. loq lay dead amid the mangled corpses of three novitiates. Several others, wounded, whimpered on the floor.

Brother Jardone, a las-pistol in his bony hand, pushed through the orderlies and ecclesiarchs gathering in the hall, and pointed the weapon at me.

'I should kill you for this, Sark. How dare you?'

Baptrice stepped forward and took the gun from Jardone. Niro gazed at me in weary disappointment.

'See to Ebhoel,' Baptrice told the sisters nearby. They unlocked the cell door and went in.

'You will leave tomorrow, Sark,' Baptrice said. 'I will file a complaint to your superiors.'

'Do so,' I said. 'I never wanted this, but I had to reach the truth. It may be, from what Ebhoel has told me, that a way to fight Uhlren's Pox is in our reach.'

'I hope so,' said Baptrice, gazing bitterly at the carnage in the hall. 'It has cost enough.'

The novitiates were escorting me back to my room when the sisters brought Ebhoel out. The ordeal of recollection had killed him. I will never forgive myself for that, no matter how many lives on Genovingia we save.

And I will never forget the sight of him, revealed at last in the light.

IX

I LEFT THE next day by launch with Kalibane. No one from the hospice saw me off or even spoke to me. From Math Island, I transmitted my report to Symbalopolis, and from there, astrophatically, it lanced through the warp to Lorches.

Was Uhlren's Pox expunged? Yes, eventually. My work assisted in that. The Blood-Froth was like the Torment, engineered by the Archenemy, just as sentient. Fifty-two medical officers, sources just like Valis, were executed and incinerated.

I forget how many we lost altogether in the Genovingia Group. I forget a lot, these days. My memory is not what it was, and I am thankful for that, at times.

I never forget Ebhoel. I never forget his corpse, wheeled out by the sisters. He had been caught in the infirmium flames on Pirody Polar. Limbless, wizened like a seed-case, he hung in a suspensor chair, kept alive by intravenous drains and sterile sprays. A ragged, revolting remnant of a man.

He had no eyes. I remember that most clearly of all. The flames had scorched them out.

He had no eyes, and yet he was terrified of the light.

I still believe that memory is the finest faculty we as a species own. But by the Golden Throne, there are things I wish I could never remember again. ♣





GUN FORGIVEN

BY GRAM HENRI

THE MIDNIGHT DARK closed on Brother Sergeant Kaelen of the Dark Angels like a fist. The emission reduced engines of the rapidly disappearing Thunderhawk were the only points of light he could see. His visor swum into a ghostly green hue and the outlines of the star shaped city below became clear as his auto-senses kicked in.

The altimeter reading on his visor was unravelling like a lunatic countdown, the shapes below him resolving into clearer, oblong forms. The speed of his descent was difficult to judge, the powered armour insulating Kaelen from the sensations of icy rushing air and roaring noise as he plummeted downwards.

With a pulse of thought, Kaelen overlaid the tactical schematics of the city onto his visor, noting with professional pride that the outline of the buildings below almost perfectly matched the image projected before him.

The altimeter rune flashed red and Kaelen pulled out of his drop position, smoothly bringing his legs around so that he was falling feet first. Glancing left and right he saw the same manoeuvre being repeated by his men and slammed the firing mechanism on his chest. He felt the huge deceleration as the powerful rocket motors ignited, slowing his headlong plunge into a controlled descent.

Kaelen's boots slammed into the marble flagged plaza, his jump pack flaring a wash of heated air around him as he landed. Streams of bright light licked up from the city, flak waving like undersea fronds as the rebels sought to down the departing Thunderhawk. But the heretic gunners were too late to prevent the gunship from completing its mission; its deadly cargo had already arrived. Kaelen whispered a prayer for the transport's crew and transferred his gaze back to the landing zone. Their drop was perfect, the Thunderhawk's jumpmaster had delivered them dead on target. A target that was thronged with screaming, masked cultists.

Kaelen ducked a clumsy swing of a cultist's power-maul and punched his power fist through his enemy's chest, the man shrieking and convulsing as the energised gauntlet

smashed through his flesh and bone. He kicked the corpse off his fist and smashed his pistol butt into the throat of another. The man fell, clutching his shattered larynx and Kaelen spared a hurried glance to check the rest of his squad had dropped safely with him.

Stuttering blasts of heat and light flared in the darkness as the remaining nine men in Squad Leuctra landed within five metres of him, firing their bolters and making short dashes for cover. A cultist ran towards him swinging a giant axe, his features twisted in hatred. Kaelen shot him in the head. By the Lion, these fools just didn't stop coming! He ducked behind a giant marble statue of some nameless cardinal as a heavy burst of gunfire stitched its way towards him from the gigantic cathedral at the end the plaza. Muzzle flashes came through smashed stained glass windows, the bullets tearing up the marble in jagged splinters and cutting down cultists indiscriminately. Kaelen knew that advancing into the teeth of those guns would be bloody work indeed.

Another body ducked into cover with him, the dark green of his armour partially obscured by his chaplain's robes. Interrogator Chaplain Bareus raised his bolt pistol. The weapon's barrel was intricately tooled and its muzzle smoked with recent firing.

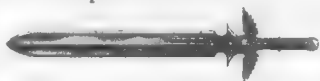
'Squad form on me!' ordered Kaelen, 'Prepare to assault! Evens advance, odds covering fire!'



A PROPHET HAD risen on the cathedral world of Valedor and with him came the planet's doom. Within a year of his first oration, the temples of the divine Emperor had been cast down and his faithful servants, from the highest cardinal to the lowliest scribes, were cast into the charnel fire-pits. Millions were purged and choking clouds of human ash fell as grotesque snow for months after.

The nearest Imperial Guard regiment, the 43rd Carpathian Rifles, had fought through the temple precincts for nine months since the

planet's secession, battling in vicious close combat with the fanatical servants of the Prophet. The pacification had progressed well, but now ground to a halt before the walls of the planet's capital city, Angellicus. The heavily fortified cathedral city had withstood every assault, but now it was the turn of the Adeptus Astartes to bring the rebellion to an end. For the Space Marines of the Dark Angels Chapter, more than just Imperial honour and retribution was at stake. Many centuries ago, Valedor had provided a clutch of fresh recruits for the Chapter and the planet's heresy was a personal affront to the Dark Angels. Honour must be satisfied. The Prophet must die.



DOZENS OF CULTISTS were pitched backwards by the Space Marines first volley, blood bright on their robes. More died as the bolters fired again. Kaelen exploded from cover, a laser blast scoring a groove in his shoulder plate. The first cultist to bar his path died without even seeing the blow that killed him. The next saw Kaelen bearing down on him and the Marine sergeant relished the look of terror on his face. His power fist took his head off.

Gunfire sounded, louder than before, as more covering fire raked the robed cultists. Kaelen fought and killed his way towards the temple doors, gore spattering his armour bright red. All around him, Squad Leuctra killed with a grim efficiency. Short dashes for cover combined with deadly accurate bolter fire had brought them to within eighty metres of the temple doors with no casualties. In their wake, more than two hundred cultists lay dead or dying.

Powerful blasts of gunfire spat from the smashed windows. Too heavy to charge through, even for power armour, knew Kaelen. He activated his vox-com.

'Brother Lucius.'

'Yes, brother sergeant?'

'You have a good throwing arm on you. You think you can get a couple of grenades through those windows?'

Lucius risked a quick glance over the rim of the fountain he was using for cover and nodded curtly. 'Yes, brother sergeant. I believe I can, the Lion willing.'

'Then do so,' ordered Kaelen. 'The Emperor guide your aim.'

Kaelen shifted position and spoke to the rest of his squad. 'Be ready. We move on the grenade's detonation.'

Each tiny rune on his visor that represented one of his men blinked once as they acknowledged receipt of the order. Kaelen glanced round to check that Chaplain Bareus was ready also. The hulking figure of the chaplain was methodically examining the dead cultists, pulling back their robes like a common looter. Kaelen's lip curled in distaste before he quickly reprimanded himself for such disloyalty. But what was the chaplain doing?

'Brother chaplain?' called Kaelen.

Bareus looked up, his helmeted face betraying nothing of his intent.

'We are ready,' Kaelen finished.

'Brother sergeant,' began Bareus, moving to squat beside Kaelen. 'When we find this prophet, we must not kill him. I wish him taken alive.'

'Alive? But our orders are to kill him.'

'Your orders have been changed sergeant,' hissed the chaplain, his voice like cold flint. 'I want him alive. You understand?'

'Yes, brother chaplain. I shall relay your orders.'

'We must expect heavy resistance within the temple. I will tell you now that I do not expect many, if any, of your men to survive,' advised Bareus, his voice laden with the promise of death.

'Why did you not brief me on this earlier?' snapped Kaelen. 'If the forces we are to face are so strong then we should hold here for now and call in support.'

'No,' stated Bareus. 'We do this alone or we die in the attempt.' His voice brooked no disagreement and Kaelen suddenly understood that there was more at stake with this mission than simple assassination. Regardless of the chaplain's true agenda, Kaelen was duty bound to obey.

He nodded, 'As you wish, chaplain.' He opened the vox-com to Lucius again. 'Now, Brother Lucius!'

Lucius stood, lithe as a jungle cat and powered a frag grenade through each of the windows either side of the cathedral doors. No sooner had the last grenade left his hand than the heavy blast of a las-cannon disintegrated his torso. The heat of the laser blast flashed his super-oxygenated blood to a stinking red steam.

Twin thumps of detonation and screams. Flashing light and smoke poured from the cathedral windows like black tears.

'Now!' yelled Kaelen and the Marines rose from cover and sprinted towards the giant bronze doors. Scattered small arms fire impacted on their armour, but the Space Marines paid it no heed. To get inside was the only imperative.

Kaelen saw Brother Marius falter, a lucky shot blasting a chunk of armour and flesh from his upper thigh, staining the dark green of his armour bright red. Chaplain Bareus grabbed Marius as he staggered and dragged him on. Kaelen's powerful legs covered the distance to the temple in seconds and he flattened his back into the marble of the cathedral wall. Automatically, he snapped off a pair of grenades from his belt and hurled them through the smoking windows. The shockwave of detonation shook the cathedral doors and he vaulted through the shattered window frame, snapping shots left and right from his bolt pistol.

Inside was a blackened hell of smoke, blood and cooked flesh. Bodies lay sprawled, limbs torn off, skeletons pulverised and organs melted. The wounded gunners shrieked horribly.

Kaelen felt no pity for them. They were heretics and had betrayed the Emperor. They deserved a death a hundred times worse. The Dark Angels poured inside, moving into defensive positions, clearing the room and despatching the wounded. The vestibule was secure, but Kaelen's instincts told him that it wouldn't remain that way for long. Marius propped himself up against the walls. The bleeding had already stopped, the wound already sealed. He would fight on, Kaelen knew. It took more than a shattered pelvis to stop a Dark Angel.

'We have to keep moving,' he snapped. Movement meant life.

Chaplain Bareus nodded, reloading his pistol and turned to face Kaelen's squad.

'Brothers,' he began, 'we are now in the fight of our lives. Within this desecrated temple you shall see such sights as you have never witnessed in your darkest nightmares. Degradation and heresy now make their home in our beloved Emperor's vastness and you must shield your souls against it.'

Bareus lifted his chaplain's symbol of office, the crozius arcanum, high. The blood red gem at its centre sparkled like a miniature ruby sun. 'Remember our Primarch and the Lion shall watch over you!'

Kaelen muttered a brief prayer to the Emperor and they pressed on.

'THEY ARE WITHIN your sanctuary, my lord!' said Casta, worry plain in every syllable. 'What would you have us do to destroy them?'

'Nothing more than you are already, Casta.'

'Are you sure lord? I do not doubt your wisdom, but they are the Adeptus Astartes. They will not give up easily.'

'I know. I am counting on it. Do you trust me Casta?'

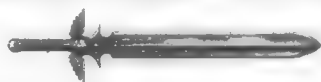
'Absolutely lord. Without question.'

'Then trust me now. I shall permit the Angel of Blades to kill all the Marines, but I want their chaplain.'

'It will be as you say, lord,' replied Casta turning to leave.

The Prophet nodded and rose from his prayers to his full, towering height. He turned quickly, exposing a sliver of dark green beneath his voluminous robes.

'And Casta...' he hissed. 'I want him alive.'



CHAPLAIN BAREUS swung the crozius in a brutal arc, crushing bone and brain. Fighting their way along a reliquary studded cloister, the Marines fought against more followers of the Prophet. The Dark Angels fought in pairs, each warrior protecting the other's back. Kaelen fought alongside Bareus, chopping and firing. The slide on the bolt pistol racked back empty. He slammed the butt of the pistol across his opponent's neck, shattering his spine.

Bareus slew his foes with a deadly grace, ducking, kicking and stabbing. The true genius of a warrior was to create space, to flow between the blades where skill and instinct merged in lethal harmony. Enemy weapons sailed past him and Kaelen knew that Bareus was a warrior born. Kaelen felt as clumsy as a new recruit next to the exquisite skill of the interrogator chaplain.

Brother Marius fell, a power maul smashing into his injured hip. Hands held him down and an axe split his skull in two. Yet even though his head had been destroyed, he shot his killer dead.

Then it was over. The last heretic fell, his blood spilt across the tiled floor. As Kaelen slammed a new magazine into his pistol, Bareus knelt beside the corpse of Brother Marius and intoned the Prayer for the Fallen.

'You will be avenged brother. Your sacrifice has brought us closer to expunging the darkness of the past. I thank you for it.'

Kaelen frowned. What did the chaplain mean by that? Bareus stood and pulled out a data slate, displaying the floor plans of the cathedral. While the chaplain confirmed their location, Kaelen surveyed his surroundings in more detail.

The walls were dressed stone, the fine carvings hacked off and replaced with crude etchings depicting worlds destroyed, angels on fire and a recurring motif of a broken sword. And a dying lion. The rendering was crude, but the origins of the imagery was unmistakable.

'What is this place?' he asked aloud. 'This is our Chapter's history on these walls. Lion El'Jonson, dead Caliban. The heretics daub their halls with mockeries of our past.'

He turned to Bareus. 'Why?'

Bareus looked up from the data slate. Before he could answer, roaring gunfire hammered through the cloisters. Brother Caiyne and Brother Guias fell, heavy calibre shells tearing through their breastplates and exploding within their chest cavities. Brother Septimus staggered, most of his shoulder torn away by a glancing hit, his arm hanging by gory threads of bone and sinew. He fired back with his good arm until another shot took his head off.

Kaelen snapped off a flurry of shots, diving into the cover of a fluted pillar. The concealed guns were pinning them in position and it would only be a matter of time until more cultists were sent against them. As if in answer to his thoughts, a studded timber door at the end of the cloister burst open and a mob of screaming warriors charged towards them. Kaelen's jaw hung open in disgust at the sight of the enemy.

They were clad in dark green mockeries of power armour, an abominable mirror of the Space Marines glory. Crude copies of the Dark Angels Chapter symbol, spread wings with a dagger through the centre, adorned their shoulder plates and Kaelen felt a terrible rage build in him at this heresy. The Marines of Squad Leuctra screamed their battle cry and surged forward to tear these blasphemers apart and punish them for such effrontery. To mock the Dark Angels was to invite savage and terrible retribution. Fuelled by righteous anger, squad Leuctra fought with savage skill. Blood, death and screams filled the air.

As the foes met in the centre of the cloister, the hidden guns opened fire again.

A storm of bullets and ricochets, cracked armour and smoke engulfed the combatants, striking Space Marines and their foes indiscriminately. A shell tore downwards through the side of Kaelen's helmet. Redness, pain and metallic stink filled his senses, driving him to his knees. He gasped and hit the release catch of his ruined helmet, wrenching it clear. The bullet had torn a bloody furrow in the side of his head and blasted the back of the helmet clear. But he was alive. The Emperor and the Lion had spared him.

A booted foot thundered into the side of his head. He rolled, lashing out with his power fist and a cultist fell screaming, his leg destroyed below the knee. He pushed himself to his feet and lashed out again, blood splashing his face as another foe died. Kaelen sprinted for the cover of the cloister, realising they had been lured out of cover by the fraudulent Dark Angels. He cursed his lack of detachment, angrily wiping sticky redness from his eyes.

The tactical situation was clear, they could not go back the way they had come. To reach the main vestibule was not an option; the gunfire would shred them before they got halfway. The only option was onwards and Kaelen had a gnawing suspicion that their enemies knew this and were channelling them towards something even more fearsome.

Bareus shouted his name over the stuttering blasts of shooting, indicating the timber door the armoured cultists had emerged from.

'I believe we have only one way out of this. Forwards, sergeant!'

Kaelen nodded, his face grim as the icon representing Brother Christos winked out. Another Space Marine dead for this mission. But Kaelen knew that they would all lay down their lives for the mission, no matter what it was. Chaplain Bareus had decided that it was worth all of them dying to achieve it and that was good enough for him.

Under cover of the cloisters, Bareus and the remaining five members of Squad Leuctra sprinted through the studded door that led out of this firetrap. Sergeant Kaelen just hoped that they weren't running into something worse.



IS THE ANGEL ready to administer the Evisceral Blessing, Casta?' inquired the Prophet.

'It is my lord,' said Casta, his voice trembling with fear. The Prophet smiled, understanding the cause of his underling's unease.

'The Angel of Blades makes you uncomfortable, Casta?'

Casta fidgeted nervously, his bald head beaded with sweat. 'It frightens me, my lord. I fear that we count such a thing as our ally. It slaughtered ten of my acolytes as we released it from the crypts. It was horrible.'

'Horrible, Casta?' soothed the Prophet, placing both hands on the priest's shoulders, his gauntlets large enough to crush Casta's head. 'Was it any more horrible than what we did to take this world? Was it bloodier than the things we did when we stormed this Temple? There is already blood on your hands, Casta, what matters a little more? Is what we do here not worthy of some spilt blood?'

'I know, but to actually see it, to taste and smell it... it was terrible!' The priest was shaking now. The memory of the Angel had unmanned him completely.

'I know, Casta, I know,' acknowledged the Prophet. 'But all great things must first wear terrible masks in order that they may inscribe themselves on the mind of the common man.'

The Prophet shook his head sadly, 'It is the way of things.'

Casta nodded slowly, 'Yes, my lord. I understand.'

The Prophet said, 'We bring a new age of reason to this galaxy. The fire we begin here will ignite a thousand others that will engulf the False Emperor's realm in the flames of revolution. We shall be remembered as heroes, Casta. Do not forget that. Your name shall shine amongst men as the brightest star in the firmament.'

Casta smiled, his vanity and ego overcoming his momentary squeamishness. Fresh determination shone in his zealous eyes.

The Prophet turned away.

It was almost too easy.



SERGEANT KAELEN stalked the darkened corridors of the cathedral like a feral world predator, eyes constantly on the move, hunting his prey. Flickering electro-flambeux cast a dim glow that threw the carved walls into stark relief and he deliberately averted his gaze from them. Looking too carefully at the images carved into the walls left his eyes stinging and a nauseous rolling sensation in the pit of his stomach.

Since leaving the death trap of the cloisters they had snaked deeper into the cathedral and Kaelen couldn't help but feel that they were in terrible danger. Not the danger of dying, Kaelen had stared death in the face too many times to fear extinction.

But the dangers of temptation and blasphemy... that was another matter entirely. The paths to damnation were many and varied, and Kaelen knew that evil did not always wear horns and breathe fire. For if it did, all men would surely turn from it in disgust. No, evil came subtly in the night, as pride, as lust, as envy. In his youth, Kaelen had known such feelings, had fought against all the whispered seductions that flesh and the dark could offer in the dead of night, but he had prayed and fasted, secure in his faith in the Divine Emperor of Mankind. He had achieved a balance in his soul, a tempering of the beast within him.

He understood that there were those who gave into their base desires and turned their faces from the Emperor's light. For them there could be no mercy. They were deviants of the worst kind. They were an infection, spreading their lies and abomination to others, whose weakened faith was an open doorway to them. If such forces were at work within these walls, then Kaelen would fight till the last drop of blood had been squeezed from his body to root it out and destroy it.

Bareus led the way, his strides long and sure. The passageway they followed dipped slightly and Kaelen could feel a cool breath of night air caress his skin. The stone walls gave way to a smooth, blackened glass, opaque and blemish free, widening to nearly ten metres across. The walls curved up into a rounded arch above them and were totally non-reflective. Doors constructed of the same material barred the way forward, the susurrant of air coming from where the glass had been cracked near the top of the frame. An ominous stain dripped down the inside face of the door from where a torn fragment of white cloth was caught, flapping in the breeze on a jagged shard of broken glass.

'Blood,' said Bareus.

Kaelen nodded. He had smelt it before seeing it. An odd whickering mechanical sound came from the other side of the doors and Kaelen felt an instinctive dread send a hot jolt of fear into his system. Bareus stepped forwards and thundered his boot into the door, smashing it completely from the frame. Black glass flew outwards and Kaelen swept through the portal, bolter and power fist at the ready. Kaelen

entered a domed arena, its stone floor awash with blood and sliced chunks of flesh. The stink of the charnel house filled the air. The same non-reflective black substance that had formed the door enclosed the arena. He pounded down some steps and skidded to a halt, his blood thundering in horror at the sight before him.

A mad screaming echoed around the enclosed arena. A dome of utter darkness rose above them as the horrifying bulk of the creature before the Space Marines turned to face them with giant, slashing strides. Perhaps it had once been a dreadnought. Perhaps it had evolved or mutated in some vile parody of a dreadnought. But whatever it was now, it was clearly a beast of pure evil. Even Bareus, who had fought monstrous abominations before, was shocked at the terrifying appearance of the bio-mechanical killing machine. Fully six metres high, the creature stood on four splayed, spider-like legs of scything blades, that cut the air with a deadly grace. A massive, mechanically muscled torso rose from the centre of the bladed legs and clawed arms, lightning sheathed, swung insanely from its shoulders, upon which was mounted an ornately carved heavy bolter. At its back, a pair of glittering, bladed wings flapped noisily, their lethal edges promising death to any who came near.

The bio-machine's head was a pulped mass of horribly disfigured flesh. Multiple eyes, milky and distended, protruded from enlarged and warped sockets. Its vicious gash of a slobbering mouth was filled with hundreds of serrated, chisel-like teeth and its skin was a grotesque, oily texture – the colour of rotten meat.

It was impossible to tell where the man had ended and the machine began.

Its entire body was soaked in blood, gobbets of torn flesh still hanging from its claws and teeth. But the final horror, the most sickening thing of all was that where the metal of the dreadnought's hide was still visible, it was coloured an all too familiar shade of dark green.

And upon its shoulder was the symbol of the Dark Angels.

Whatever this creature was, it had once been a brother Space Marine.

Now it was the Angel of Blades and as the Space Marines recoiled in horror, the monster howled in mad triumph and stamped forwards on its scythe legs.

The speed of the Angel of Blades was astonishing for such a huge creature. Blood burst from its face as the Space Marines overcame their shock and began firing their

bolters. Every shell found its mark, detonating wetly within the Angel's dead skin mask, but its lunatic screams continued unabated. A silver blur lashed from the monster. A casual flick of its bladed leg licked out and eviscerated Brother Mellius quicker than the eye could follow. His shorn halves collapsed in a flood of red, but his bellows of pain were drowned by the Angel's hateful shrieks. The baroque heavy bolter mounted on the beast's shoulder roared and blasted the remains of Mellius apart.

Kaelen knew it had to die. Now.

He sprinted across the courtyard as the rest of his squad spread out and leapt in front of the rampaging machine, a brilliant burst of blue-white lightning arcing from his power fist as he struck at the beast's face. A coruscating corona of burning fire enveloped its huge frame as the lethal power of Kaelen's gauntlet smashed home. Its deformed flesh blistered and sloughed from its face, exposing a twisted metallic bone structure beneath. The Angel struck back, unheeding of the terrible hurt done to it.

Kaelen dodged a swipe meant to remove his head and rolled beneath its flailing arms. He powered his crackling fist into its groin and ripped upwards.

The power fist scored deep grooves in the Angel's exterior, but Kaelen's strike failed to penetrate its armoured shell. The beast side-stepped and another leg slashed out at him. He ducked back, not quick enough, and the armoured knee joint thundered into his chest, hurling him backwards.

Kaelen's breastplate cracked wide open, crushing his ribs and shattering the Imperial eagle on his chest into a million fragments. Bright lights exploded before his eyes as he fought for breath and struggled to rise, reeling from the massive impact. Even as he fell, he knew he had been lucky. Had the cutting edge struck him, he would now be as dead as Mellius. Heavy bolter shells spat from the shoulder mounted gun, hammering into his legs and belly, driving him to his knees.

One shell managed to penetrate the cracks in his armour and he screamed, white hot fire bathing his nerves as the shell blasted a fist sized hole in his hip, blood washing in a river down his thigh. He fell to the ground as the Angel loomed above him, its bloody claws poised to deliver the death blow and tear Kaelen in two.

With a howling battle cry, Chaplain Bareus and the surviving members of Squad Leuctra rushed to attack the monstrosity from the flanks and rear. Brother Janus died instantly,

decapitated by a huge sweep of the creature's claws. Another leg whipped out, impaling his corpse and lifting him high into the air. Brother Temion leapt upon the thing from behind, holding his sword in a reverse grip and driving it into the Angel's back with a yell of triumph. The monster screamed and bucked madly, casting the brave Space Marine from its back. Its wings glittered in the torchlight and powered wide with a ringing clash of metal. A discordant shriek of steel on steel sounded as the Angel's wings slashed the air and a storm of razor edged feathers flew from the beast's back and engulfed Temion as he raised his bolter. He had no time to scream as the whirlwind of blades slashed through him and tore his body to shreds. The bloody chunks of flesh and armour that fell to the ground were no longer recognisable as human.

Bareus smashed his crozius arcanum against the back of one of the Angel's knee joints, ducking a swipe of the beast's razor wings. Brother Urient and Brother Persus hammered the huge machine from the front while Kaelen pushed himself unsteadily to his feet.

Urient died as the Angel caught him with both sets of claws, ripping his body apart and tossing the pieces aside in contempt. The beast staggered as Bareus finally chopped through the silver steel of its leg. It tried to turn and slash at its diminutive assailant, but staggered as the severed leg joint collapsed under its weight. The huge arms spun as it fought for balance. Kaelen and Bareus were quick to press home their advantage.

Kaelen smashed his power fist into the monstrosity's mutated face, the huge gauntlet obliterating its features and tearing through its armoured sarcophagus. Kaelen kept pushing deeper and deeper inside the heart of the monster's body. The stench gusting from the rotted interior was the odour of a week old corpse. His fist closed around something greasy and horribly organic and the Angel shuddered in agony, lifting Kaelen from the ground. He grasped onto the beast's shell with his free hand, still struggling to tear the beast's heart out. Agony coursed through his body as the Angel's limbs spasmed on his wounded hip and chest. Kaelen's grip slid inside the Angel's body, glistening amniotic fluids pouring over his arm and preventing him from slaying the vile creature that lurked within its body. His grip finally found purchase. A writhing, pulsing thing with a grotesque peristaltic motion. He closed his fist on the fleshy substance of the monstrosity's heart and

screamed as he released a burst of power within the bio-machine's shell.

The monster convulsed as the deadly energies of the power fist whiplashed inside its shell, blue fire geysering from its exhausts. Its legs wobbled and the massive beast collapsed, sliding slowly to its knees. A stinking black gore gushed from every joint and its daemonic wailing dimmed and at last fell silent. Kaelen wrenched clear his gauntlet, a grimace of pain and revulsion contorting his features as the lifeless Angel of Blades toppled forwards, a mangled heap of foetid meat and metal.

Kaelen slid down the Angel's shell and collapsed next to the foul creature, blood loss, shock and pain robbing him of his prodigious strength. Breathless, Chaplain Bareus grabbed Kaelen's arm and helped him to his feet. Brother Persus joined him, his dark green armour stained black with the monster's death fluids.

The three Dark Angels stood by the rotted corpse of the thing and tried to imagine how such a thing could possibly exist. Kaelen limped towards the remains of the beast and stared at the shattered carapace of the Angel's shell. The iconography on the sarcophagus was of a winged figure in a green robe carrying a scythe, its face shrouded in the darkness of its hood. Fluted scrollwork below the image on its chest bore a single word, partially obscured by black, oily blood. Kaelen reached down, wiping his hand across the carapace and felt as though his heart had been plucked from his chest. He sank to his knees as he stared at the word, willing it not to be true. But it remained the same, etched with an awful finality.

Caliban.

The Dark Angel's lost homeworld. Destroyed in the Great Heresy thousands of years ago. How this thing could have come from such a holy place, Kaelen did not know. He rose and turned to Bareus.

'You knew about this, didn't you?' he asked.

The chaplain shook his head. 'About that abomination, no. That we would face one of our brothers turned to the Dark Powers... yes. I did.'

Kaelen's face twisted in a mixture of anger and disbelief, 'The Dark Powers? How can that be possible? It can't be true!'

A voice from the shadows, silky and seductive said, 'I'm afraid that it is, sergeant.'

Kaelen, Bareus and Persus spun to see a tall, hugely built figure in flowing white robes emerge from the shadows accompanied by a stoop shouldered man with a shaven head. The tall figure wore his black hair short, close

cropped into his skull and three gold studs glittered on his forehead. His handsome features were smiling wryly. Bareus swiftly drew his bolt pistol and fired off the entire clip at the robed figure. As each shot struck, a burst of light flared around the man, but he remained unharmed. Kaelen could see the faint outline of a rosarius beneath his robes. The small amulet would protect the Prophet from their weapons and Kaelen knew that such protection would be almost impossible to defeat. All around the arena the opaque glass walls began to sink into the ground and a score of armed men stepped through, their weapons aimed at the three Space Marines. Bareus dropped the empty bolt pistol and reluctantly Kaelen and Persus did likewise.

'How can it be true?' asked Kaelen again. 'And who are you?'

'It is very simple, sergeant. My name was Cephesus and once I was a Dark Angel like you. When your dead husk of an Emperor still walked amongst you, we were betrayed by Lion El'Jonson. He abandoned our Chapter's true master, Luther, and left with the Emperor to conquer the galaxy. The Primarch left him to rot on a backwater planet while he vaingloriously took the honour of battle that should have been ours! How could he have expected us not to fight him on his return?'

Bareus stepped forwards and removed his helm, tossing it aside as he stared at the tall figure with undisguised hatred. He raised his crozius arcanum to point at his chest.

'I know you, Cephesus. I have read of you and I will add your name to the Book of Salvation. It was necessary that Luther remain behind on Caliban. His was a position of great responsibility!'

'Necessity, chaplain, is the plea for every act of ignorance your Imperium perpetrates. It is the argument of tyrants and the creed of slaves,' snapped the Prophet. 'Wipe the virtue from your eyes, we were cast aside! Scattered throughout time and space to become the Fallen. And for that I will kill you.'

He nodded towards the dead monstrosity, his earlier composure reasserting itself and said, 'You killed the Angel of Blades. I am impressed.'

The Prophet smiled and parted his robes, allowing them to fall at his feet. Beneath them, he wore a suit of powered armour, ancient and painted unmistakably in the colours and icons of the Dark Angels. The ornate form of a rosarius, similar to the one worn by Bareus, hung on an ornate chain, nestling against the eagle on his breastplate. 'I was Cephesus, but that name no

longer has any meaning for me. I foreswore it the day Lion El'Jonson betrayed us.'

'The Primarch *saved* us!' roared Bareus, his face contorted in fury. 'You dare to blaspheme against his blessed name?'

Cephesus shook his head slowly. 'You are deluded, chaplain. I think that it is time you start looking at yourself and judge the lie you live. You can project it back at me, but I am only what lives inside each and every one of you. I am a reflection of you all.'

Sneering, he descended the steps to stand before the interrogator chaplain, pulling a thin chain from a pouch around his waist. Attached along its length were several small polished blades, each inlaid with a fine tracery of gold wire. Bareus's eyes widened in shock and he reached for his hip scabbard, drawing an identical blade.

'You call these weapons Blades of Reason. Such an irony. It is as much a badge of office to you as your crozius, is it not? I have eleven here, each taken from the corpse of a Dark Angel chaplain. I will take yours and make it an even dozen.'

Without warning he snapped a blade from the chain and spun on his heel, slashing it across Persus's throat. The Space Marine sank to the ground, arterial blood bathing his breastplate crimson.

Kaelen screamed and launched himself forwards, swinging his power fist at the Prophet's head. Cephesus swayed aside and smashed his bladed fist into Kaelen's ribs.

The neural wires inscribed in the blades shrieked fiery electric agony along Kaelen's nerves, and he howled as raw pain flooded every fibre in his body. His vision swam and he fell to the ground screaming, the blades still lodged in his side.

Bareus howled in fury and slashed with his crozius arcanum. Cephesus ducked and lunged in close, tearing the rosarius from around Bareus's neck. Silver and gold flashed, blood spurted. The chaplain fell to his knees, mouth open in mute horror as he felt his life blood pump from his ruined throat. He fell beside Kaelen and dropped his weapons beside the fallen sergeant.

Cephesus reached down and knelt beside the dying chaplain. He smiled indulgently and scooped up Bareus's intricate blade, threading the thin chain through its hilt.

'An even dozen. Thank you chaplain,' hissed Cephesus.

Sergeant Kaelen gritted his teeth and fought to open his eyes. The Prophet's blades were lodged deep in his flesh. With a supreme effort of will, each tiny movement bringing a fresh spasm of agony, he reached down and dragged the weapon from his body. His vision cleared in time for him to see the Prophet leaning over Chaplain Bareus. He growled in anger and with strength born of desperation lunged forwards, throwing himself at the heretic.

Both hands outstretched, he slashed with the blades and tried to crush the Prophet's head with his power fist. But Cephesus was too quick and dodged back, but not before Kaelen's hand closed around an ornate chain around his neck and tore it free. He rolled forwards, falling at the Prophet's feet and gasped in pain.

Cephesus laughed and addressed the men around the arena. 'You see? The might of the Adeptus Astartes lies broken at my feet! What can we not achieve when we can humble their might with such ease?'

Kaelen could feel the pain ebbing from his body and glanced down to see what lay in his hand and smiled viciously. He lifted his gaze to look up into the shining, mad face of the Prophet and with a roar of primal hatred, struck out at the traitor Dark Angel, his power fist crackling with lethal energies.

He felt as though time slowed. He could see everything in exquisite detail. Every face in the arena was trained on him, every gun. But none of that mattered now. All he could focus on was killing his foe. His vision tunnelled until all he could see was Cephesus's face, smugly contemptuous. His power fist connected squarely on the Prophet's chest and Kaelen had a fleeting instant of pure pleasure when he saw the heretic's expression suddenly change as he saw what Kaelen held aloft in his other hand.

Cephesus's chest disintegrated, his armour split wide open by the force of the powerful blow. Kaelen's power fist exploded from his back, shards of bone and blood spraying the arena's floor. Kaelen lifted the impaled Prophet high and shouted to the assembled cultists.

'Such is the fate of those who would defy the will of the immortal Emperor!'

He hurled the body of Cephesus, no more than blood soaked rags to the ground and bellowed in painful triumph. He was a terrifying figure, drenched in blood and howling with battle lust. As he stood in the centre of the arena, the black glass walls rapidly began to rise and the armed men vanished from

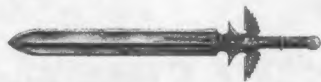
sight, their fragile courage broken by the death of their leader.

Kaelen slumped to the ground and opened his other fist, letting the rosarius he had inadvertently torn from around the Prophet's neck fall to the ground. A hand brushed his shoulder and he turned to see the gasping face of Chaplain Bareus. The man struggled to speak, but could only wheeze breathlessly. His hand scrabbled around his body, searching.

Guessing Bareus's intention, Kaelen picked up the fallen crozius arcanum and placed it gently into the chaplain's hand. Bareus coughed a mouthful of blood and shook his head. He opened Kaelen's fist, pressed the crozius into the sergeant's hand and pointed towards the corpse of the Fallen Dark Angel.

'Deathwing...' hissed Bareus with his last breath and closed his eyes as death claimed him.

Kaelen understood. The burden of responsibility had been passed to him now. He held the symbol of office of a Dark Angel chaplain and though he knew that there was much for him yet to learn, he had taken the first step along a dark path.



N EWS OF THE Prophet's death spread rapidly throughout Angellicus and within the hour, rebel forces broadcast their unconditional surrender. Kaelen slowly retraced his steps through the cathedral precincts, using the vox-com to call in the gunship that had delivered their assault. He limped into the main square, squinting against the bright light of the breaking morning. The Thunderhawk sat in the centre of the plaza, engines whining and the forward ramp lowered. As he approached the gunship a lone Terminator in bone white armour descended the ramp to meet him.

Kaelen stopped before the Terminator and offered him the crozius and a thin chain of twelve blades.

Kaelen said, 'The name of Cephesus can now be added to the Book of Salvation.'

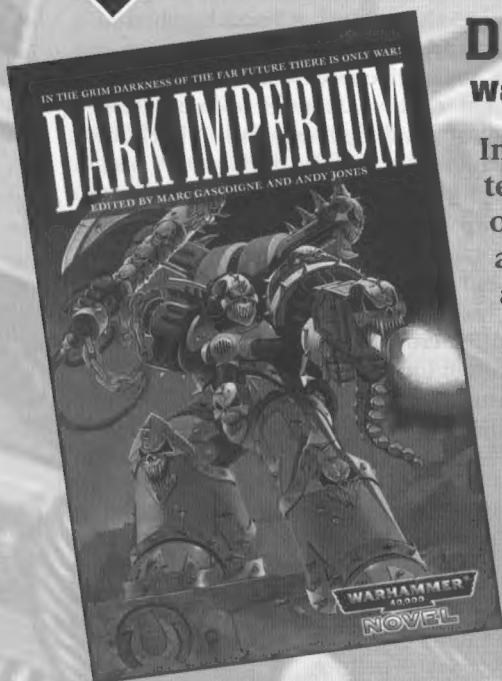
The Terminator took the proffered items and said, 'Who are you?'

Kaelen considered the question for a moment before replying.

'I am Deathwing,' he answered. ♣



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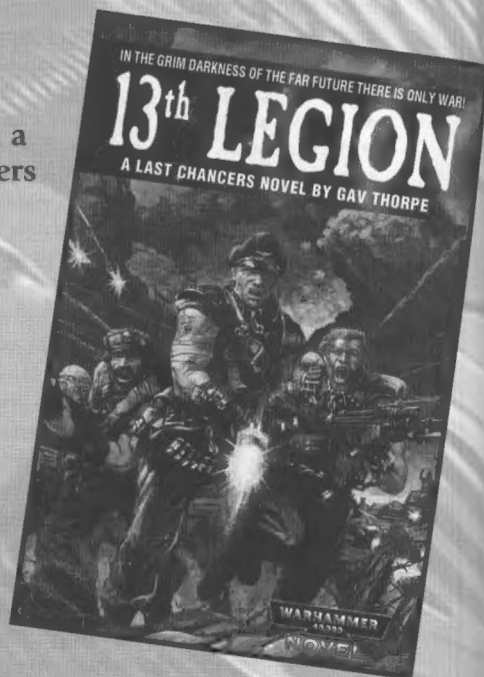
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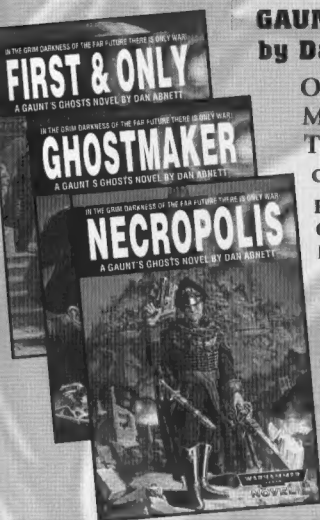
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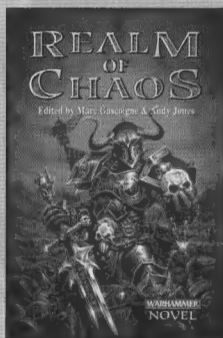
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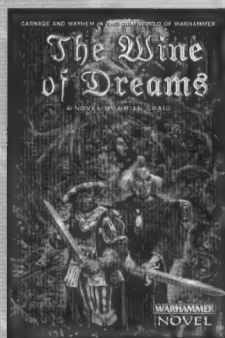
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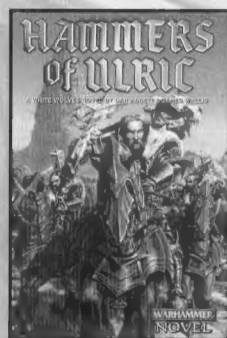
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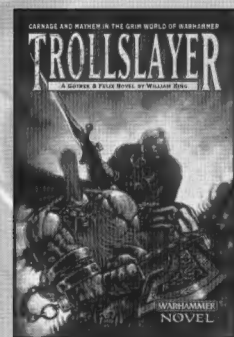
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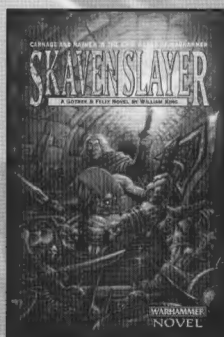
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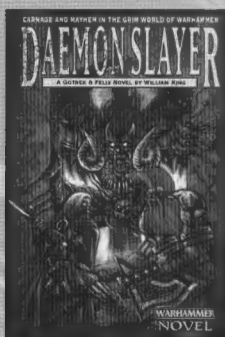
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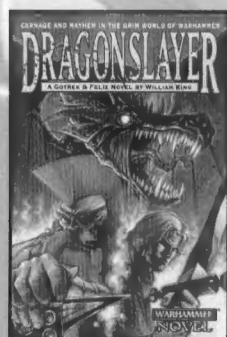
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The boulevard was littered with dead and wounded mutants. Limbs, bodies and pools of blood were scattered over the cobblestones, a few conscious mutants groaned or sobbed. To his right, a couple he had wed just after arriving were on their knees, hugging each other, wailing over the nearly unrecognisable corpse of their son. Wherever he looked, lifeless eyes stared back at him in the harsh glare of the searchlight. The SSA were picking their way through the mounds of bodies, kicking over corpses and peering at faces.

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'Still 'avin some teevin' problems with the smart bomb missile, Ugzob. Starting to run out of smartboy test pilots too...'

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The preternatural fiend moved in a capering, dance-like manner, its glowing body brilliant in the darkness, sounds of lunatic amusement emanating from its clenched, grinning jaws. The daemon stopped just out of reach of the witch hunter's sword, settling down on its haunches. It trained its fiery eyes on the scarlet-clad Templar, regarding him with an unholy mixture of hatred, humour, and hunger.

• **PESTILENCE by Dan Abnett**

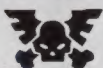
He was going to kill me, I'm certain, but I was slumped and my legs wouldn't work. Then Kalibane, bless his brave heart, flew at him. My devoted servitor rose up on his stunted hind limbs, the bionics augmenting his vast forelimbs throwing them up in a warning display. From splayed foot to reaching hand, Kalibane was eleven feet tall. He peeled back his lips and screeched through bared steel canines.

• **UNFORGIVEN by Graham McNeill**

Bareus stepped forwards and thundered his boot into the door, smashing it completely from the frame. Black glass flew outwards and Kaelen swept through the portal, bolter and power fist at the ready. Kaelen entered a domed arena, its stone floor awash with blood and sliced chunks of flesh. The stink of the charnel house filled the air.

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